

1-618-1

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for two weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

Penalty for over-due books 2c a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.



Public Library

Kansas City, Mo.

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

BERKOWITZ ENVELOPE CO., K. C., MO.

DARK CONQUEST

BY WILLIAM HEYLIGER



D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY
INCORPORATED
NEW YORK 1936 LONDON

COPYRIGHT, 1936, BY
D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY, INC.

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission of the publisher.

Copyright, 1935, 1936, by The Methodist Book Concern
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FOREWORD

IT WOULD BE NATURAL FOR PEOPLE TO THINK of The Seeing Eye as a school where blind people are taught to use extraordinary and highly trained dogs. They think of the dogs, perhaps, as a considerable advance over the faithful little animals one sometimes sees leading a blind person as he taps his way slowly along the sidewalk, his tin cup and pencils a silent plea for alms.

But The Seeing Eye has been able to do much more with dogs than merely to provide safe and effective eyes through which blind people gain freedom to go about in even the heaviest traffic. It is changing people who were once devoid of ambition, who once considered that their handicap robbed them of any opportunity in life, into men and women ready and willing to compete for economic independence. It is this which lifts the work of The Seeing Eye from something that is valuable to something that is significant.

In *Dark Conquest*, Mr. Heyliger has portrayed the real Seeing Eye. In his investigations which preceded the writing of this book, he found many examples of rehabilitation equal to that

FOREWORD

which took place in Jerry Lane. Some of them are truly extraordinary and involved years of effort on the part of the school. Others are equally impressive perhaps because of the simplicity and ease with which they are accomplished. In every case it is the dog which makes it possible.

Blind students, men and women, come to the school in classes of eight, the maximum an instructor is able to teach at one time. The dogs are fully educated, having graduated from a three months' course. While the major objective of the students is to learn through practice and instruction how to direct the dog and follow her guidance, some of them must learn other things, too. Many of them, since blindness, have lost the faculty of finding their way in known surroundings. Others have fallen into the habit of shuffling feet and groping walk, with body bent forward and hands outstretched. Some have never walked down stairs unaided. Fear has defeated them—not just the fear of physical injury but of economic dependence. It is this fear which so often has grave mental consequences—when the mind deteriorates and no longer can evaluate properly its impressions. These are things which must be unlearned if the dog is to bring independence. At The Seeing Eye the student is taught to free himself from these habits of help-

FOREWORD

lessness, so that self-reliance and courage gradually return. Anticipation replaces despair as the dog opens a new world for her master, one of which he dreamed but never hoped to have again.

There are lectures and study periods at the school, but all the practical work of the student with his dog takes place on the streets of Morristown, New Jersey, where the school is located. Here, morning and afternoon each day, the student gradually assimilates his lessons. Near the end of his month's course he is able to go about the city without an instructor, just as he will on his return home.

The method by which the dog and man work together is simple. The dog guide does not take her master to his destination without being told where to go. It is not generally appreciated, but blind people develop an adequate mental picture of their own communities. All they need is a means by which they may be guided around *their* picture. In a strange city they ask directions as anyone else would. It is simple to remember the blocks and to remember also when to go right or left.

The master directs his dog by oral commands of "Right," "Left," or "Forward." But it is the dog that guides the master. By means of the handle of the leather harness which he holds

FOREWORD

lightly in his left hand, she takes him around pedestrians, sidewalk obstructions, automobiles, anything which may interfere with his safe progress. The pace is rapid, rather faster than that of the average pedestrian. Upon arriving at street crossings the dog guides her master to the edge of the curb and stops. He finds the edge immediately with his foot or cane and then gives her the command for the direction in which he wishes to go.

For the purposes of his book, Mr. Heyliger has necessarily taken certain liberties with the method of educating the blind student. But he did so with the full approval of *The Seeing Eye*, for he has told his story with vivid accuracy wherever fundamental factors are involved.

The sympathy with which Mr. Heyliger has developed the character of Jerry Lane and his appreciation of the psychology of blind people have made it possible for him to tell a story which *The Seeing Eye* sincerely hopes will be read by those thousands of people who, with misdirected compassion, are willing to give freely to the blind of their pity and charity but who withhold that which sightless people need most—understanding.

DOROTHY HARRISON EUSTIS
President of The Seeing Eye

DARK
CONQUEST

CHAPTER I

THERE WAS A TOUCH OF THE MYSTICISM of the Irish in the Lanes. Because of this they figured time largely from overshadowing events rather than from dates. At first a gentle mother used to say, "Since your father died——" Three years later the gentle voice was stilled and Molly Lane, at eighteen, found herself facing the responsibility of two younger brothers. She said, "Since mother died——" Then, abruptly, all the world changed and darkened. Molly said, with a catch in her voice, "Since Jerry met with his accident——" She said it with her head up and her black eyes level, but in spite of all she could do discouragement crept in and spread its shadow over her heart and over the house.

DARK CONQUEST

It was a house never intended to give shelter to discouragement. The porch was wide and cool, the dining-room bay and the upstairs dormers were homey, and the shingles had weathered gently as the shingles of a friendly house should weather. And yet, at the foot of the porch steps, the gentle warmth faltered and died. Weeds grew along the edges of the paths, there were gaps in the palings of the front fence, and a lawnmower sagged listlessly in a patch of too-high grass.

The village said that the Lane house was going downhill. Translated, that meant that the Lanes were going downhill, too—Molly, now twenty-four, and Jerry, twenty, and a red-haired stick of dynamite named Michael who was only twelve.

Jerry Lane, standing beside the railing on the friendly porch, knew that the sun was shining for he could feel its warmth. He knew that the weather would probably continue fair for the wind out of the west was

DARK CONQUEST

dry on his sensitive cheeks. He knew that Agnes Kenyon, the girl next door, was picking flowers for his sharp ears could hear her moving about and the scent of fresh buds was fragrant in his nostrils. It was only through sound, and feel, and smell that the world lived for Jerry Lane. He was blind.

The quiet of the summer day was broken by the sound of Molly's voice calling through the kitchen door. "Michael!"

Silence.

"Where are you, Michael?"

The laughing face of Agnes Kenyon appeared from behind a trellis in the next yard. "Do you think the legs squirming through our hedge might be Michael, Molly?"

Molly called an emphatic, "Michael Lane!"

A red head popped into view behind the hedge. "Were you calling me, Molly? Were you?"

"You know well I was calling you."

DARK CONQUEST

"How did I know? Gosh, am I the only Michael? I bet if I came running every time somebody called 'Michael' I'd have such sprained legs—"

"Will you come here?"

He came crackling through the hedge. Agnes tossed him a rose, but he glared at her and left it unheeded where it fell. There it lay, a burst of crimson against the unkempt green of the neglected grass.

"Why can't we have flowers, Molly?" he asked in the kitchen. "We always used to have flowers."

"Next year," she said gayly, "you'll be strong enough to spade the beds and, like that, we'll have the finest flowers in the world." Dear Lord, if there could be only one small plan, some spark of enthusiasm to take them from under the deadening pall of two blind, hopeless eyes. "It's two o'clock, Michael."

The boy's face fell. "Do I have to take him out again today?"

DARK CONQUEST

"Hush! Do you want him to hear you?"

"Aw, gosh, it's every day. I guess you wouldn't want it every day. I was going for a swim with Tubby Sneetz."

"You can have your swim later."

"Tubby's got to take out his newspapers later. Do you know what happens in summer if you don't keep clean? You get germs. Suppose I came home with a germ because I couldn't wash it off with a swim—"

"You'll take Jerry out now," Molly said with finality. A moment later her warm heart softened. After all, Michael was only a small lad with no thought of burdens or cares. "Probably it's the last time," she said. "The dog will be here tomorrow."

Michael sniffed. "Then I'll have to mind a dog, too, won't I? Do you know what Tubby says? Do you? Tubby says anybody who spends good money for a dog for a blind ma—" His voice stopped in the middle of the word as though a silencing hand had been clamped over his mouth.

DARK CONQUEST

Out on the porch Jerry had heard. The blind face held neither hope nor despair but a listlessness that was worse than despair—a spiritless, apathetic resignation that had slowly dampened the weeks and the months. It helped to account for the unmended fence, the ragged walks, the significance of the unused, rusting lawn-mower.

Michael shuffled out to the porch. "You ready, Jerry?"

"I don't think I'll go walking today," Jerry said in a flat voice.

Michael blinked uneasily. "Why won't you, Jerry? You always go walking, don't you?"

Jerry began, "When your own brother doesn't want to—"

"Gosh, Jerry, I don't want to go swimming. Honest, I don't. Suppose I get a cramp? I guess you don't know how many fellows get cramps, do you?"

Jerry began again, "When your own brother—" Then his voice died on its com-

plaint for Molly had appeared suddenly at his elbow.

Her eyes blazed at Michael and the boy swallowed. Jerry fumbled uncertainly with the buttons of his coat.

"You don't feel ill today, Jerry?" she asked crisply.

"N—no."

"Then it's time for your walk."

Without protest Jerry permitted himself to be led down the porch steps. The constant, uncertain tapping of a cane grew faint as the brothers went up the street.

Molly's head ached as it always ached lately after one of these silent struggles with Jerry. She had to have a will for herself, a will to hold a roaring imp of a lad in line, a will that had to become the will of a discouraged brother who had none of his own. And Michael's report of what Tubby had said about the purchase of the dog disturbed her. So much of her faith in the future had been built upon the dog. If—if—

DARK CONQUEST

She dared not think of failure. Weeks ago she had read of German shepherd dogs trained to be the eyes of the blind. Dogs that lifted blind men from despondency and made the world live again. She had written to the kennel in a wild glow of hope and the kennel had replied:

Thank you for your frank letter. We thoroughly appreciate the situation you describe. Could you afford to pay \$100 for one of our dogs? This kennel is endowed by public-spirited men and women and does not operate for profit. If you cannot pay \$100 how much could you pay? Even if you can pay nothing let us know. Sometimes, where conditions warrant, we give a dog to a blind person of character and promise.

While these dogs are equipped to work intelligently with the blind, it is necessary for each dog to become adapted to her blind master and the master to come to know his dog. This usually takes at least three weeks. Invariably each blind man comes here to Whippany to be trained to work with his dog. I gather from your letter that you could not afford to send your brother East. It happens that one of our men,

DARK CONQUEST

Mr. Joseph Bridges, is soon to visit his mother who lives, Mr. Bridges tells me, about five miles from you. In this case—not because we make a habit of sending out dogs but because he will be near you—he is willing to bring the dog with him and undertake the training at your home.

You will understand, of course, that such training presents difficulties that we do not experience at the kennel. Here, at Whippany, the blind man is away from his family and from what might be well-meant but mistaken interference with the training and the intimacy, faith and trust that must develop between the blind man and the dog. Therefore, should a dog be brought to you, I must rely upon your discretion.

Molly had \$10 laid away. But \$10 seemed pitifully inadequate and her soul shrank from charity. In the end she had gone with her magazine and the letter to David Ferris, a teller for the Midland Trust Company, and David had listened to her with a hunger in his eyes. Once— That, however, was before Jerry's accident. After that Molly felt that she could not handicap a husband with her two brothers, and one of them blind.

DARK CONQUEST

"David," she had asked, "would the bank lend me \$90 on a note?"

He had walked out of the consulting-room and had come back with a note for her to sign. She thought it was the bank's money she had borrowed. But banks do not lend money unless there is security and what security could a Lane give?

David had walked with her to the door. "If this should prove insufficient, Molly—"

"Where else would I go?" she asked, her black eyes level with his.

"Nowhere else—ever," David had said.

And tomorrow the dog would be here. She heard a cane tapping on the walk and began to sing as though she did not have a care in the world. It was the greeting Michael and Jerry heard as they came up the walk.

She sang again in the morning, but now the song was a flag to which to nail her own courage. Faintly, in the distance, a train whistled for the crossing below the station. Half an hour later a short, thick-set man

came along the street with a magnificent dog on a leash. There was majesty in the regal pose of its great, tawny body, pride in the arch of its intelligent head, beauty in the sweeping flourish of its gold-tinted tail. Molly ran out to the porch.

"Jerry! It's the dog."

Jerry began to tremble. "Is it a big dog? I'm afraid of big dogs. I—"

The man called up from the sidewalk. "Is this the Lane home?"

"Yes, sir," Molly answered eagerly. "Come right up."

Man and dog were on the porch. Jerry shrank back. The man put a hand upon the blind boy's arm.

"This is a dog you'll come to love," he said. "Here, Lady." The dog pressed against Jerry's legs. "Lady Nan wants to be sure you have welcomed her. Put your hand on her head."

Jerry's cold, reluctant fingers found a stiff, alert ear. It seemed to him, fumbling

DARK CONQUEST

in the never-ending dark, that the ear was part of a head monstrously large. He stood frozen.

"My name," the man said pleasantly, "is Joe Bridges. What's yours?"

"Jerry."

"Jerry, I'm going to leave you and Lady alone for a little while to get acquainted."

"No!" Jerry cried in a panic. "Don't let him, Molly."

"What are you afraid of?" Joe Bridges asked in that same pleasant voice. "Of Lady? You mustn't fear her. She'd tear apart anybody who'd try to harm you."

Again a strong mind had spoken its will and a timorous will shrank into obedience.

"Come," the man said to Molly. They passed into the house.

"Was that necessary?" Molly asked, tight-lipped.

"Yes. He's lost his poise; we must give him no chance to waver. How long has he been blind?"

DARK CONQUEST

"Four years." She waited—five minutes, ten. Of course this man who seemed so sure, so certain, probably knew best. And yet all she could see in her imagination was her brother, in motionless terror, standing white and rigid beside a strange dog.

"We'll go back to him now," Mr. Bridges said.

"Look!" Jerry cried when he heard their footsteps. "She likes me." The dog had not moved from his side.

The blood leaped in Molly's veins. Agnes Kenyon watched from her own porch. Michael had appeared from somewhere and sat upon the steps.

"Hey, Molly! Can I take the dog down to Tubby's?"

It was Joe Bridges who answered. "I'm afraid not, youngster."

"Aw, gosh, I only want to show her to Tubby—"

"No," the trainer of dogs said emphatically. "Lady Nan stays with Jerry every

moment. She sleeps in his room at night. As a matter of fact, for the first ten days or so I must be absolutely alone with Jerry during training periods. That is imperative and I must ask you to obey. Lady Nan can never be a general family pet; she is to be Jerry's eyes."

"You hear that?" Jerry demanded. "She's my dog."

"Aw, keep your old mutt," Michael scowled. "I bet Tubby's dog would chew her ears off." At that moment a lean, rangy mongrel sniffed along the fence and Tubby Sneetz called a "Hey, Mickey!" from the street. Michael stalked down toward the gate.

"That will be about all for today," Mr. Bridges announced. "I'll see you tomorrow, Jerry."

"You're—you're not taking Lady away?" Jerry asked.

The trainer of dogs laughed. "You want her now, don't you? No; she stays here. To-

DARK CONQUEST

morrow she'll take you out for your first stroll."

Jerry ran a tremulous hand down the dog's back. "Tell me what she looks like, Molly."

Molly tried to find words to tell him. The telephone rang and she hurried inside.

"Did the dog arrive?" came David Ferris's voice from the bank.

"David, I'm almost afraid to believe it's true. It's the first interest he's shown in anything."

"I'm glad," David told her, "for your sake as well as his."

A shadow scurried and skulked through an angle of her vision. She called, but there was no reply. Upstairs the bathroom door was locked.

"Michael, open that door."

A key turned reluctantly. A small boy, the ripped sleeve of a shirt dangling, gave her an experimental grin. "It isn't torn much, Molly."

DARK CONQUEST

"Who were you fighting with?" she asked coldly.

"Aw, Tubby said Jerry's dog was a flea-trap."

"Didn't I hear you call her a mutt? Not many hours ago?"

"Aw, that was different. That was just us. Your own family makes a difference, doesn't it, Molly? Doesn't it?"

"May it always make a difference," Molly prayed in her heart. But she couldn't show softness to a twelve-year-old filled with a red belligerency of loyalty.

"I'm giving you," she said, "five minutes to clean yourself."

That afternoon a woman's song lifted the house out of its years of discouragement for now it was a song of happiness and hope. A blind youth who had gone his lonely way had found a companion. His voice lost its plaintive note of resignation as he crooned to the dog. Soft paws padded from room to room in his wake.

DARK CONQUEST

"Look!" he cried to Molly. "She must like me. She follows me everywhere."

Molly's song rose on a loftier note. At bed-time Jerry and the dog went upstairs. Ever since he had been blind he had slept with his door open so that she might hear him if he stirred in the night. Now the door closed softly but definitely. Molly stood in thought. If he was to be kept from wavering— She went upstairs and threw the door wide.

"You're letting her out," Jerry cried fretfully. "The man said she must sleep in my room."

"If she leaves it," Molly said, "she's not the dog we think her."

"But—" The protest died, drowned in the habit of surrender. Jerry lay there in wakeful unrest, and the house quieted. Suppose—suppose the dog didn't like him as much as he thought she did? Suddenly, above everything else in the world, Jerry wanted the dog to like him. An hour struck,

and after a long time a single gong announced the half-hour. The blind youth moved on his pillow.

"Lady," he whispered.

Something stirred in the room. A moist nose muzzled the palm of his hand.

"You do like me, Lady, don't you?" he choked, and fell asleep with his hand on her head.

Molly saw a subtly changed Jerry come down to breakfast. Something of the fixed blankness of the blind had left his face. She gave him the dog's food, and he set the dish on the floor and knelt beside Lady while she ate.

"Aw," Michael grumbled, "why doesn't he put a napkin under her chin?" It still rankled with the boy that the dog was to be in no part his.

But he was all rapt attention when Mr. Bridges arrived. A saddle-harness was strapped around Lady's strong shoulders; a U-shaped leather handle ran up to end in a

semi-rigid hand-grip. For an hour Jerry struggled with the harness, buckling it on and slipping it off. After that it was time for him to go out with the dog.

Groping, tapping nervously with his cane, he went down four steps. "Where are you, Mr. Bridges?" he cried.

"Here," called the dog-trainer.

"She's pressing against me."

"She's not pressing against you," the man soothed. "She's close to you, very close, but not pressing. You'll grow accustomed to that closeness. She must stay close. She's a part of you—your eyes."

They were on the sidewalk. Abruptly the dog started at a fast pace. Jerry cried out once. Then he dropped the leash and stood swaying, his arms out-thrust as though to ward off threatening, unseen dangers.

Molly ran down the steps.

"Please!" The trainer of dogs blocked her off with a sharply upraised hand. He turned to the boy and spoke slowly. "Jerry,

DARK CONQUEST

you're through feeling your way with a cane. You must trust Lady fearlessly. You must follow her boldly. She will never lead you to anything but safety." He placed the hand-grip of the harness in Jerry's hands.

Again the blind lad dropped the hand-grip in panic. But this time he had taken a dozen steps.

"Again," Joe Bridges urged.

Molly, white-lipped, watched the struggle of blindness to follow uncertainly into darkness and dread. Agnes came through the hedge and stood beside her and she was scarcely conscious of the other girl's presence. Her throat ached and she lost track of time.

It was over at last. A dog took a shaken, pathetically strained figure up the porch steps and indoors. Joe Bridges strode in from the street.

"That was cruel," Agnes blazed. "Brutally cruel."

The dog-trainer looked at her without

emotion. "Are you a member of this family?"

"I'm a friend of Miss Lane's."

"I must insist that both friends and family keep hands off. This is one reason we have never before trained a blind man away from the kennel. What happened to-day was necessary. Other things may be necessary that you will not understand. I must insist upon no comments in Jerry's presence; I must trust to your common sense not to undo my work through your conversations with him when I am not here. So long as he crawls with a tapping cane he's a blind man. At present he moves too slowly, the dog moves too fast. His speed must be coaxed up. Lady's brought down. When both speeds meet, when confidence has been developed—I can show you blind men who walk faster and bolder than men with sight. They are blind men removed forever from the shackles of their blindness."

DARK CONQUEST

The phrase rang like a hymn in Molly's ears. Removed from the shackles of their blindness! In the kitchen she found a wan Jerry sitting beside the dog. Michael pleaded with a burning eloquence.

"What do you mean you can't do it again? Sure, you can. You're doing swell. Isn't he, Molly?"

"Splendidly," said Molly, and steeled her heart against the pallid appeal of a blind, sightless face.

Gently, persistently, patiently, Joe Bridges went on from day to day. A stumbling Jerry walked and clung to a hand-grip, a half-block, a block, a quarter of a mile. He came to know every significant message of the dog's body so close to his legs: the almost complete blockade that warned him he must stop, the half-pressure that slowed him up, the oblique veering that took him around everything that stood in his way.

Suddenly the confidence that Joe Bridges had sought to create was born. He came

home one afternoon in a glow. Molly heard the ring of his voice. With the grip in his left hand and the spirited, magnificent shepherd dog at his side, he went upstairs whistling. When, Molly thought, had she heard him whistle before?

"Mr. Bridges," she said impulsively, "I can't find the words to thank you. I had begun to doubt you would make Jerry do what you wanted."

"I haven't—yet. Tomorrow I must send him out alone."

She looked at him sharply.

"That," he told her, "is sometimes hard."

She counted the slow hours of the night. Morning brought a round of duties that kept her mind occupied. Michael held a shouted conversation out an upstairs' window with a boy in the street; a dog's paws padded on the stairs. And at ten o'clock capable-looking Joe Bridges came through the gate.

"How are you, Jerry?" He did not wait

DARK CONQUEST

for a reply. "Well, harness her. I have some things to attend to and I'll see you off."

There was a stark silence. "Aren't you coming with us?" Jerry asked.

"I'll pick you up later."

It was casually said as though it were the most natural thing in the world for a blind man to walk out with a dog. And yet this time the silence brooded like a pall.

"I don't think I care to go out today," Jerry said at last.

The trembling, panicky hysteria was gone from his voice. Molly knew then that association with Lady Nan had already done something to him. It would not longer be possible to face him down, to conquer him, with strength of will. Somehow, in these days of struggle, he had developed a will of his own.

Joe Bridges said quietly, "Harness her, Jerry."

"No." A hand went up to fumble with the buttons of his coat. "When you don't

know what the next step will bring— What do you know about being blind? I can't do it. Not only with a dog. No. I can't and I won't."

Silence brooded. Lady Nan, her ears rigid in attention, stood protectingly beside Jerry as though she knew something was wrong and tried to shield him. He dropped a hand to her head.

Molly stood motionless. Joe Bridges had said no interference, but the time he had set was past. The trainer knew dogs, but she knew her brother. Watching his hand upon the dog's head she made a quick decision.

"You're fond of her, Jerry, aren't you?" she asked.

"Fond?" He spoke as men speak of the thing they love. "She's the greatest dog in the world."

"That's talk."

"I mean it."

"You can't mean it. You have no faith in her."

DARK CONQUEST

Jerry stood as though carved. The dog licked his fingers and a slow stiffening ran through his body.

"Faith?" he said wonderingly. "I have more faith in her— Michael!"

"Michael isn't here," Molly said through dry lips.

"Give me her harness."

Kneeling, he buckled it on. His fingers were unsteady. Those same fingers groped and found a cane.

"Out!" he said. "Forward, Lady."

Joe Bridges stepped aside. Nobody spoke as the dog, slowly and carefully, took him down the steps.

CHAPTER II

MOLLY LANE WAS RIGHT; JERRY HAD DEVELOPED a will. It was only a faint spark of will as yet, a thin streak of iron that might some day be a firm, unbending rod. Thin as the streak was, all the command that Molly could have put into an order would not have moved him today. But she had challenged his faith in Lady Nan and—and that had been different. His pride in the dog and his love for her had taken him down the porch steps.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. Accustomed to walk with the dog on his left and Joe Bridges on his right, the absence of the man left a black void. The trainer had never once put a hand upon his arm, but the man had always been there. That was it—there. He had been a voice, life, help if help were

DARK CONQUEST

needed. And now the voice, and the life and the help were gone.

Moisture grew clammy along the blind man's spine. Today the dog led him no faster than yesterday or the day before and yet he seemed to rush headlong into a black pit. His mind painted perils and dangers. Suppose the dog, too, had reacted to the presence of Joe Bridges? Suppose she should make a mistake now that the trainer was not with them?

"Lady," Jerry whispered hoarsely, "stand by me."

Men and women brushed past him. They had brushed past him on all the other days, but today he shrank from moving bodies he could not see. A skating boy went by in a wild rush and panic gripped him. He might be knocked off his feet, pitched into the roadway, struck by a car. Unmanned, he called the dog to a halt.

Lady Nan, patient, sat beside him, and watched him, and waited.

DARK CONQUEST

The unseen tide of human traffic flowed in an unbroken stream. Walking or standing still he was subject to the same hidden hazards. He struggled for the ability to think and reason calmly. If he gained nothing by standing still, why not walk? But at least while motionless he was anchored to the ground. Walking meant stepping forward into the terrifying jaws of confusion and uncertainty. Yet he knew that he could not stay here. He had to go back to the house or go on.

The palm of the hand that gripped the handle was damp. Twice he almost brought himself to give the signal that would bring the dog to movement and twice his courage faltered and failed. The human tide eddied and swirled about him and footsteps and voices receded and advanced. If he went back— But he couldn't go back. They had challenged his faith in the dog. He forced his lips to move.

"On, Lady!"

DARK CONQUEST

On into that yawning, unknown blackness with nothing between him and disaster but a dog. Two-way winds on his face and the clamor of traffic criss-crossing told him he was at a corner. Lady, shifting her body slightly closer to his legs, blocked his advance as she always did when they came to a curbing so that he might test the height of the step-off with his cane.

He had crossed this very roadway with Lady on his left and Joe Bridges on his right. He had trusted her then—but Joe Bridges had been there, too. Now he could not force himself to step off the curb into that lane through which cars and trucks hurtled.

“Right,” he said.

Lady shifted position and led him along a new street.

He sweated again. The thought of walking out blind into automobile traffic had left him sapped and limp. Joe Bridges had told him that all over the country blind men were following their dogs through the

thickest traffic. Perhaps, at the next corner—

But at the next corner terror left him helpless. Again he turned right and went along a street. If there were only somebody with him! Not that he wanted help, just that somebody were there. Then he wouldn't be so woefully alone.

He was not, though, quite as alone as he thought. A hundred feet behind the stocky form of Joe Bridges trailed in his wake.

Down to one corner and turn, back to another corner and turn. The shaking fear of the crossings suddenly made the side-walks a much smaller panic. So much a smaller panic that he began to walk with comparative boldness. Instinct, some sixth sense of the blind, told him at last that even though the dog-trainer was not here Lady was veering him to right and to left unerringly and taking him safely through the flow of people.

How many times had he walked the

DARK CONQUEST

block? Eight, ten? He could return to the house now. He turned a corner and made for home. Joe Bridges passed him with a quick stride.

"Forty minutes," he reported to Molly. "That's better than the average first time out alone."

Molly's face became radiant. Watching her brother and the guiding dog come down the street toward the house she marveled at the changes a few days had wrought. The blind groper who had tapped out a slow, cautious advance now walked with triple his former speed.

Jerry unstrapped the harness from the dog. "Who says I have no faith in her?"

"It was a thrust to spur you on," said Molly.

"Lady can take me anywhere," he boasted, and something in his tone caused her eyes to pucker suddenly into sharp lines. He passed into the hall and the dog that had become his shadow went with him. In the

DARK CONQUEST

privacy of his room his lips twitched. The boast had been a brace for a newly found pride, but up here alone with the dog pride fell from him. Lady, as though aware of something wrong, put a consoling head upon his knee.

"It wasn't your fault," he said.

Down on the porch Molly spoke in an undertone. "What was it that went wrong?"

"How do you know anything went wrong?" the man demanded.

"I know his voice."

Joe Bridges nodded. "Yes. I might have guessed that. He faltered at the corners."

"Should he have crossed?"

"We mustn't expect too much at the start," the trainer said gently.

Here was something she had not foreseen. It meant another step along a hard road, a new hazard that would have to be overcome. If the corners stopped Jerry he would be chained to the square of his own block, a

prisoner liberated but only partly free. She met it as she met all other issues, squarely.

"When are you leaving us, Mr. Bridges?"

"Within a few days. At the kennel we never send a man away with his dog until they work together perfectly. But I cannot stay here indefinitely—that's the disadvantage of training this way. You understand that? Anyway, there's only one hazard left. Once he crosses streets there's nothing more to worry about. You must have confidence in him—and patience."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Whatever help he gets now," the man said, "must be of his making and Lady's."

Molly turned that over in her mind. She had thought once Jerry began to walk alone— But apparently walking was only the first step; and after Joe Bridges had departed, she saw with clear-eyed vision there might be many, many steps of which she knew nothing. Thoughtfully she came in from the porch. Jerry, who had come down-

stairs, went through the tripping grass with slow progress and stood at the hedge talking to Agnes Kenyon. A dog snarled at Lady through the fence and was driven away by Michael. Shortly thereafter Molly heard the boy prowling about the cellar and went to the head of the stairs.

"Who's dog was that, Michael?"

"Tubby's. He'd better stop looking for fights with Lady. You know where the oil is, Molly? The oil in a squirt-can. I want to oil the lawn-mover."

"What for?"

"Aw, gosh, Jerry can't walk through all that high grass, can he?"

Molly found the oil. Once she had prayed for some small urge, some faint spark of ambition that would lead them to effort. "You'll have to sickle first, Michael."

His face fell, but only for a moment. "You don't know where the sickle is, do you?"

Her heart leaped. "You'll be famished

when you're finished," she said. "Perhaps I'll find the time for a three-layer cake."

Ingredients not called for by the cookbook—laughter and gladness—went into that cake. Molly was sure that no layers had ever come from the oven lighter and browner. At four o'clock David Ferris's car came from the bank and stopped at the curb. Michael had disappeared, but a third of the rank grass had been sickled and raked.

David frowned. "You're not doing that, Molly?"

"Why should I with a willing brother in the house?"

"You don't mean Michael?"

"Who else?"

"Where is he?" David demanded with enthusiasm. "This ought to be worth an ice-cream cone."

But Molly shook an emphatic head. "A cone? For him to know it as a bribe? That would never do. Besides, I've baked him a cake."

DARK CONQUEST

"Oh," he said, "a cake." Suddenly he laughed at her. "Of course that isn't a bribe?"

"But he doesn't know it as a bribe," she said seriously. "It's just a little something extra for the table."

The laughter died out of him. "What a job you're doing!" he said slowly.

The days went on. Michael, having finished with the grass, spaded the flower-beds. It was too late to plant seeds, but Molly found the next spring glowing with promise. Miraculously the sun was brighter, the air sweeter. Into their world a dog had walked, and now all the world was changed.

But soon the sun of that world darkened. Jerry, coming and going with the dog, fell into periods of silent brooding. Joe Bridges had said it would take time. Time, yes; but all at once she was afraid of too much time. Let street corners form the bars of a prison long enough and Jerry might become convinced he would never break free.

On the day that this knowledge came to her David Ferris telephoned from the bank. "I saw Jerry walking with Lady this morning. He'd be safe with her anywhere, wouldn't he?"

"Anywhere," said Molly.

"There's a good picture showing tonight."

Fear of leaving Jerry had kept her in the house; it was ages since she and David had gone out together. But now, with Lady a constant shadow at her brother's side—

"I'll be ready at eight o'clock," she said. Her heart went up a beat.

Under the spell of music, of soft lights, of drama upon a screen, her anxieties vanished. Whatever tomorrow might bring, tonight was filled with glamour and enchantment. David drove her home. Abruptly she was back with a house that needed constant care and a blind man slowly surrendering to despair. Her breath came and went in a sigh.

"Jerry?" David asked.

"Yes." She told him of the hazards that built her blind brother's prison. But his thoughts, as he listened, were only of her.

"It isn't fair," he protested. "No young girl should have to carry so much. Can't I help?"

"Nobody can help," she told him. Nobody, Joe Bridges had said, but Lady. But how could even the wisest dog be of use to a man who, having found his courage, began to lose it again? She let herself into the darkened house and went upstairs. A guardian shadow came to the door of Jerry's room.

"Lady," she whispered, "help him."

In the morning a yawning stomach drove Michael down early for breakfast. He ate until the first pangs of hunger were satisfied. Then:

"You know why Jerry always stands around the corner, Molly?"

"Perhaps he likes to hear the swift rush of the cars," Molly said casually.

Jerry's step sounded in the hall. "What's that about corners?"

Molly gave Michael a warning, silencing look. "Corners?" she asked vaguely as though the subject were of such small moment it had already gone from her mind. She brought hot cereal from the stove.

Jerry fed the dog first. Usually he stood beside her talking to her as though she were some friend of intimate understanding, but today he was silent and grave. Michael left for school with his books in a strap; a moment later they heard him yelling shrilly in the yard.

"It's that Sneetz dog again," Molly said from the window. Jerry seemed not to have heard her. The flesh around his sightless eyes was pinched and puckered.

"What were you and Michael saying about corners?" he asked.

Molly saw there was no escape. "Michael asked me why you stood there so often."

"Because—because I'm afraid to cross,"

DARK CONQUEST

Jerry said. Even in moments of fear he was no longer the self-pitying whiner. "I try not to be afraid, but I can't force myself off the curb. I try every day. I'm going to try again today." His voice went up. "And tomorrow, and the day after, and every day until I do it."

But Molly knew he had either to win to freedom soon or be forever lost.

He buckled the harness on Lady and stood up a little wearily. "Out," he said.

Sidewalks had become safe, familiar ground. He had come to know what every twist and movement of Lady's body meant; his steps quickened, shifted, halted as he read and interpreted her silent commands. But as the noise of the corner grew in his ears his pace came down to an apprehensive crawl and the hand that held the leash trembled.

The curb might have been a mountain so completely did it stop him. A fiber of his soul that he had tried to stiffen and hold

firm shrank and melted. His hearing registered a terrifying clamor of turmoil—the blare of horns, the sinister suction and whirl of tires speeding over concrete, the rattle and clangor and roar of cars, busses and trucks in wild tumult. Hidden from his sight it became all the more terrifying. His knees grew weak.

“Might I help you across?” some one asked at his elbow.

“Thank you,” he said with an effort, “I’m not crossing.” What good would it do him to cross with a hand on his arm? Nothing would be settled, nothing won. And once on the other side—He swallowed painfully. Once on the other side he would be marooned, unable to come back, cut off from his own house.

Lady, restless at the curb, urged him gently.

“I can’t make it,” he gulped. “You understand, Lady, don’t you? I can’t.”

A signal passed down through the

U-shaped handle, and the dog turned obediently to bring him back along the familiar street. The heart slowly went out of him. Beaten again! Beaten by unseen, roaring monsters. Shut up in torment, hemmed in by fantastic terrors, locked in behind unbreakable walls of black horror—

“Look out, Jerry,” a voice cried sharply.

A Thing rushed upon him out of the shuddering blind world. He felt the threatening passage of a body; a hot breath steamed against the hand that held Lady's leash. Lady whimpered and moved against him, and he almost lost his balance. The Thing rushed again, snarling now and snapping, and again Lady jerked about. He had to shift the leash to save himself. But even as he tottered and fought to stay on his feet he knew the nature of the attacking horror. It was a dog.

The street rang with cries and shouts. The snarl of the charging beast seemed to be on all sides of him. Lady, panting and whim-

DARK CONQUEST

pering, never leaving his side, twisted, and turned and circled frantically. Staggering, buffeted, helpless, he rocked in a dizzy chaos of sick dismay.

People, bodies, voices were around him. Somebody shouted, "Drive that dog off," and arms held him and supported him. Tongues babbled. "That's the Sneetz dog, isn't it?" The world steadied, and Lady trembled against his leg. Through force of habit his tremulous hand reached for her. The hairs along her spine were stiff as wire.

Jerry shook with a nervous chill. The world had steadied, but it was still a world of dark, suspended terror. A hand held him by the right arm.

"I'll be all right in a moment," Jerry whispered.

"I'll take you home," said a voice.

"Lady—can take me—home," he said. His one thought at the moment was to save Molly the shock of seeing him led by a stranger.

DARK CONQUEST

But Molly, finding him on the porch, needed only one look at his face. It was marked with disaster.

"What happened, Jerry?"

"Another dog."

Her hand went up to her throat. "What did Lady do?"

"I don't know. I couldn't see." He said again, "I couldn't see."

She stood very still. What had happened today was a calamity that could not be talked away. She could only pretend an undismayed calmness and hope that her brother would come to calmness too. But even as she pretended she knew that where before he had been afraid to cross corners he might now be afraid to go out with the dog at all.

The faith was gone from Jerry. He was a blind man once lifted up momentarily by a guiding light and now plunged back into hopeless blindness again. He felt that there would never be another moment without its

terror and uncertainty; never another moment when he would walk beside Lady in safety and confidence.

He sat there stricken as the morning passed. Agnes Kenyon talked gayly to Molly across the hedge and Molly went out into the yard. What was said then he did not know, but suddenly the joy and the laughter were gone from Agnes's voice. Children began to come through the street from school. He heard Michael's shrill yelp, the gruffer tones of Tubby Sneetz. Lady sat up at his feet.

A thought beat through his numb despair. The Sneetz dog might be with Tubby. His hand dropped to grasp Lady's thick coat.

Soft hairs slipped through his fingers. Lady, with a low, harsh sound in her throat, was gone from him in a powerful leap.

Michael's shout broke the stillness. "Lady! *Lady!* Get your dog, Tubby. Get—"

The blind, hidden universe became a bedlam of battle. Children screamed in the

street and the yard was a maelstrom of mad, snarling fury. Jerry stumbled to his feet and clung to the porch rail in helpless anguish.

"Molly!" His cry was the cry of a soul engulfed.

But Molly, aroused by the turmoil, was already there. "Oh! What shall we do? Michael! Agnes! Can't somebody stop them?"

As abruptly as it had begun the fight was over. One moment there was vicious conflict; the next moment peace. A dog's howls receded into the distance.

"Did you see Lady give it to Tubby's dog?" Michael shouted from the lawn. "Did you, Molly? Did you see it, Agnes?"

Jerry choked. "Is—is she all right?"

"Aw, since when could Tubby's dog hurt Lady?"

Michael's feet pounded the porch steps and Jerry felt the pressure of a strong body against his legs. He sank to his knees. They said she was all right, but— His hands went

over her and sought reassurance, over her regal head and along the tawny back. After that his arms went around her neck and held her.

"Lady just made one rush," Michael clamored, "and then Tubby's dog was on his back and Lady had him by the throat. But she didn't bite him. You know what she did? She just shook him like she was saying for him to watch his step or she would give it to him. And then she let Tubby's dog up and Tubby's dog went scooting."

Jerry's arms tightened around a proud neck. "I didn't understand, Lady," he said.

A warm tongue touched his cheek.

"But I understand now." He stood up and reached for the harness, and Molly caught her breath with the miracle of what had happened to his face. The tragedy of two hours ago had been wiped away. "Oh, but I understand perfectly now."

"What do you understand now?" Agnes asked. "Something about Lady?"

"Don't you see? When the Sneetz dog attacked her this morning she didn't fight back. She had me to think of. I know what happened; she kept facing him and driving him off. That's the reason she kept turning me around. When the Sneetz dog came in the yard she was out of harness, free. She taught him a lesson and came back to me. No matter what happens she'll always think first of me." A signal passed through the handle and Lady took him to the steps.

Only Molly guessed the magnificent faith that sent her brother forth. He went down through the gate and turned boldly to the right and she ran to the fence and stood there with Michael on one side of her and Agnes on the other and her eager breath coming and going jerkily through parted lips.

"What is it?" Agnes asked.

"I think it's the hour we've been waiting for," said Molly.

Michael hung halfway across the fence. "Look! He's down at the corner."

DARK CONQUEST

Molly had him by the coat lest he pitch over. "Can you see him now?"

"Sure. He's standing at the corner."

"Don't lose him, Michael."

"Aw, I can see him swell! He's—he's—Look! He's crossing the street. He's crossing with Lady. Look!"

Molly's heart swelled with a prayer.

And down at the corner there was exaltation in the heart of a blind man who had broken down a door, who had left terror behind, who had snapped his chains. Out in the roadway the dog halted him with a warning movement and a car passed in front. They went on and a car passed behind. She halted him again, and they were at the curb on the other side.

He waited there to drink in the knowledge of this wondrously new freedom, to taste the savor of his deliverance. There were no more unseen dangers, no more hidden, yawning pitfalls, no more stepping forward into menacing jaws of doubts. There was no more

DARK CONQUEST

doubt; there were no more barriers. Boundaries had vanished. The whole village was his to move through as he pleased.

"About, Lady," he said.

The shepherd dog turned.

"Forward."

Michael, still draped across the fence, cried out, "Jerry's crossing the street again with Lady."

They came toward the house triumphant; a dog of single-minded loyalty that had found her devotion weeks before, a blind man who had found his courage and his dog only that day.

CHAPTER III

AUTUMN CAME EARLY THAT YEAR AND brought rich activity to a house that had lain long in hopeless sloth. A transformed Michael went off with a boy's express-wagon to the near-by hills and came back with a load of wild grapes. While Molly made jelly and filled the house with spicy odors he raked the fallen leaves and dug them into the flower-beds, and planted a basket of bulbs that Agnes Kenyon brought over. The long-promised garden would come at last.

A blind man walked freely and confidently beside a guiding dog, and Molly marveled at the dog's uncanny intelligence. If a patch of frozen dew glistened upon the porch steps in the early morning Lady made sure that Jerry

did not step upon the treacherous spot, and at a door she always stopped with her head directly under the knob so that blind hands did not have to fumble and grope. Apparently the great, tawny beast could not figure height; and yet, somehow, she never led Jerry under a tree from which a branch hung low enough to touch his face. As Molly's wonder grew so did Jerry's faith soar and become limitless.

The Lane house was a house reborn, and yet there were problems. A dog of heavy bone and muscle had to be fed twice a day. Twice a day meant sixty meals a month. Molly felt shame at the thought. And yet this was a home where necessity compelled the counting and strict valuing of small coins.

The neighborhood butcher opened an unexpected door. "Miss Molly," he said, "that dog of Jerry's must be able, almost, to eat her own weight. Why don't you have Michael stop in for scraps?"

DARK CONQUEST

"And you'll let him run an errand for you if the need arises?" she asked eagerly. It was her nature that where she took there also must she give.

And it was her nature, too, to meet problems squarely and to scorn excuse and evasion. The note she had signed when she bought Lady was almost due. Three days before the date of payment she telephoned David Ferris. He stopped at the house on his way home from the bank.

"David," she said, "I'm afraid they'll be angry with me."

He studied her face and saw the shadows in the frank eyes. "Why should they be?"

"I have only \$15 I can put toward the note."

"What of it? Almost all notes are paid off piece-meal."

Her relief hurt him. She brought an old wallet from the pantry and counted out bills upon the table. He knew how slowly she must have saved them, dollar by dollar.

DARK CONQUEST

"You mustn't worry about the note, Molly."

"But it was so fine of them to let me have it. Last night I scarcely slept."

The money burned his hand. "I'm sure the bank would wait. If you need this—"

"I have a greater need to pay back what I borrowed," she said.

Fall slowly turned to winter. Agnes Kenyon, who now crossed the yard almost every day, helped Molly piece together a new quilt. Michael grunted and swung an ax in the cellar and brought up armfuls of wood for the stove.

"Do you see what I'm getting?" he demanded. "Do you, Molly?"

Molly stared at him blankly.

"Aw, gosh, don't you see all the new muscles I'm getting?"

"Of course I do," Molly said gravely, and filled his perpetually empty stomach with wild grape jelly and bread.

The first heavy snow fell, and after that a

DARK CONQUEST

succession of white storms, and even Lady could not lead a blind man through mounds and drifts. Jerry grew restless and fretful. Watching his fresh warmth dwindle through the storm-bound days. Molly saw clearly that something more had to be done. Of course, after each storm, Lady could take him out as soon as streets and crossings were cleared and passable; but if this were to be a hard winter, with one snow piling on top of another so that even those with sight found it difficult to get about, how was he to fare through a long drag of mountainous snowfalls? Spring might find him slipped back almost to where he had been before.

She sought to find an answer to this latest threat. There was, she told herself, no problem without its solution. If they could discover something for him to do, something that a mind locked away in a dark brain could take an interest in—

"Maybe," she said to Agnes, "he could learn to read as the blind read."

DARK CONQUEST

Agnes looked doubtful. "Didn't you try that once before?"

"It didn't get as far as trying. Don't you see, he had so little heart then. Anyway, I'll ask him."

The eagerness of her brother's response warmed her. "Could I, Molly?"

And suddenly it dawned on her that she did not know. If it were necessary for him to leave home, to go to some school for the blind, where would the money come from? Would he be able to bring Lady? If Lady were barred what good would it do to send him away to fret out his heart with longing?

"Can I?" Jerry asked again.

"We'll soon know," she promised. White flakes swirled before a wind that whistled and moaned around the corners of the house. She took overshoes from a closet and snapped the fasteners shut.

"Who'll tell you?" Jerry asked.

Molly thought, "It's the dog has given him the urge." Aloud she said, "There's a State

DARK CONQUEST

Board for the blind. Anyway, the village librarian will know."

Agnes followed her through the hall. "Surely you're not going out in this wild storm?"

"Why not?"

"The weather may be clear tomorrow."

"And tomorrow Jerry may be asking for an answer." She disappeared up the street through a white mist of falling snow.

Michael came in from school blowing on his fingers. The day darkened. Agnes put on the kettle for tea and watched for Molly's return. But it was Jerry's blind-man's ears that first heard her step.

"It's fixed," Molly announced from the door, shaking snow from her coat. "The librarian telephoned to the State Capital. There'll be a woman coming and there'll be books in braille at the library." She took a cup of tea from Agnes and sipped gratefully. "It's a brave drink when you're near perished," she sighed.

DARK CONQUEST

Jerry said, "Lady, I'm going to learn to read. What do you know about that?"

All Lady knew was that her master's voice was filled with joy. That was enough. Her tawny tail thumped the floor in a rapt approval.

Presently a Mrs. Martinson arrived from the State Board for Aid to the Blind and the work of opening another door for Jerry began. The instructor came once a week on the early afternoon train and spent an hour and a half with her pupil. There was always a wait for the afternoon train that would take her back and Molly served her with tea and cake.

"He's making remarkable progress," Mrs. Martinson reported at the end of a month. "But why in the world did you wait so long to start him?"

"He'd have none of it before," Molly told her.

"What produced the change? I'm always interested in that."

"You've seen his dog?"

"Oh!" The instructor glanced into the other room where Lady lay at the feet of a man whose fingers pored over the raised characters on a book page. "I can understand that. Those who go blind are usually more difficult than those born blind. First comes the shock of blindness, then rebellion, then depression. Something must happen to snap them out of it. So it was the dog. Well, I'm glad it was something. That brother of yours has a mind. He'll amount to something."

"But the blindness—" Molly began.

"Tush! I know several blind musicians and a blind physician whose specialty is diagnosis. It depends upon the man."

Agnes asked eagerly, "Is there anything that I might do to help?"

"Why, yes," Mrs. Martinson said slowly. "Miss Lane has the house to take care of. If somebody, after awhile, would read with him, the same things he's reading, it could be a big help."

"That's my job, Molly," Agnes warned. Her eyes glowed.

And so the winter that Molly had dreaded passed busily and happily for an absorbed, industrious Jerry. When walking was at all possible he was abroad with the dog; on the days when the highways were choked his fingers moved with a hungry rapture across the pages of raised letters.

By spring he was able to read rapidly. And now two interested, eager voices blended on the porch. What he read in braille Agnes read in normal print. They discussed books, the book they were reading at the moment, the books they intended to read, and were together for hours every day.

Molly, watching the intimacy that grew between them, was struck more by the glow that had fallen upon Agnes than by the steadily deepening interest in life reflected on Jerry's face. It was to be expected that her brother would expand for all his world had expanded. And yet it was Agnes who

DARK CONQUEST

seemed to take the most from the relationship. It was as though, in helping Jerry, she had suddenly found a rich vein of happiness for herself.

The spring days lengthened and the bulbs that Michael had planted thrust their green shoots through an awakening earth. And now Jerry's growing self-confidence and Agnes's daily companionship gave Molly a freedom that she had not known in years. Almost every Wednesday night found her at the moving-picture theater with David, and on fine Saturdays they drove up to the cool, green hills in the afternoon. Coming back from one of these automobile trips they found a keen, young man talking to Jerry and Agnes, and another young man packing away a camera and plateholders. Michael, elbows on knees, chin in the cup of his palms, scowled disapproval from the porch.

Agnes hurried across the grass. "They're from the *State-Gazette*, Molly; somebody sent the newspaper word of what Jerry is

DARK CONQUEST

doing. It was all right to let them photograph him, wasn't it?"

Molly found herself wishing Agnes had waited for her return. Whether or not it was all right, the thing was done. What effect exploitation and publicity might have upon her blind brother she could not tell. Probably it would have no effect. But there was Michael. The cameraman and the reporter hurried off to catch a train back to the State Capital and her eyes went apprehensively toward the porch.

"Did they take a picture of you, Michael?"

Michael stood up with dignity, looked after the departing newspapermen with contempt and stalked into the house.

Molly's lips twitched. She was glad that the men from the *State-Gazette* had ignored him. A Michael with his picture in the paper might become a trying problem.

Monday the story reached the village, a picture lay-out and two columns of reading matter under a four-column head. Jerry

listened intently while Molly read. What, she wondered, would he think of it?

"They didn't say half enough about Lady," he complained. That was his only comment.

And then, suddenly, an avalanche of letters descended upon the house. The *State-Gazette* story had touched the public and men and women wrote to a blind man in a northern corner of the State—letters friendly and helpful, letters charged with encouragement and cheer, a few letters from relatives of somebody blind asking eager, hopeful questions. Molly was dismayed.

"They're from kindly people," she said, "and it would be ungenerous to ignore them. But what are we going to do?"

"Answer them," Agnes said briskly.

"But—" Molly could not say in Jerry's hearing that a blind man's script would be laborious and weird. "Where are we to find the time?"

Agnes said, "If we had a typewriter—"

DARK CONQUEST

Molly shook her head. The rental of a typewriter would cost money and there was no money for the purpose; not with a \$35 balance of a note still left at the bank. It would be hard enough to buy stamps for the letters much less pay for the use of a typewriter.

But Agnes said again, "Yes, if we had a typewriter—" Apparently she had given Molly's objection merely an absent-minded attention. Whatever she was turning over in her mind came to a triumphant end. She motioned to Michael with a commanding finger. "I think I can do something about this, Molly. Come along, youngster."

"Where has she gone?" Jerry asked.

Molly didn't know. It was disconcerting to have somebody make a decision for you and leave you in the dark as to what the decision was.

An hour later Agnes and Michael were back, and Michael lugged a typewriter in his arms.

DARK CONQUEST

"Where," Molly asked blankly, "did you get it?"

"The high school always has a few spare machines lying around." Agnes had her gloves off, the typewriter on a table, a chair in place. "This is the first chance I've had to put my commercial course to use. All Jerry has to do is to tell we what he wants to say." She read him the first letter.

At noon there came a halt.

"You'll stay for a bite?" Molly asked.

"I'd better go home," Agnes told her. "My family may begin to wonder if I still live there."

Voices murmured in the sunny living-room through the afternoon and the typewriter ran in quick, staccato spurts. At five o'clock Molly saw that Agnes had pushed back her chair and that Jerry was down on one knee wrestling with Lady. She brought in a pitcher of lemonade.

"You angel!" Agnes cried. She sipped the cool liquid and looked at Molly over the top

of the glass. "I'm afraid this will bore Jerry to death before it's over."

"I like it," Jerry said stoutly. Here was contact with the great, hidden, outside world. He was stirred and vivified.

"Like it well enough to do a little more work after supper?" Agnes asked. "There'll probably be more letters tomorrow. It will be better if we get all we can out of the way."

"Can we start right after supper?" Jerry demanded eagerly.

Molly's heart experienced that queer swelling that came to it in moments of emotion. She went with Agnes as far as the hedge.

"I can't thank you enough," she said, "for the interest you're bringing into his life."

"Am I really helping him?" Agnes cried in a glow. "Oh, I'm so glad. I really want to help so much. Is there anything else I can do?"

"Nothing but remain the wonderful friend you are," said Molly. She sent Michael off to the post-office with the letters ready

DARK CONQUEST

for mailing. Jerry had left the house with Lady to give the dog an hour's exercise before supper. How full, she thought gratefully, her brother's days had become. So full that now the efforts that occupied him stretched on into the night. With the thought that a cake would cheer them at the end of the night's work she brought flour and a mixing-bowl from the pantry. She was whipping the batter when a cyclone blew past the window and roared up the back steps. The kitchen door burst open.

"Hey, Molly! Will you give me a lend of \$15? Will you?"

Molly dropped the mixing-spoon. "Where in the world would I be getting \$15?"

"Aw, gosh, Molly, Tubby Sneetz wants to sell his newspaper route for \$15. Do you know how much money I could make? Do you?"

Molly said, "I'm sorry, Michael." Fifteen dollars was out of the question. Besides, the mercurial lad might be all eager fire today

and all dead ashes next week. What then, with the \$15 already spent?

The boy's face darkened. "I'll bet you could give me a lend of \$15 if you wanted to. You had a lot of money to buy Jerry a dog."

She had not told her brothers how this money had been raised. It had never been her habit to load them with worries that were hers. Michael had been too young; blind Jerry too helpless. But now she saw the danger of a suspected favoritism.

"I didn't have money for the dog, Michael. I borrowed it."

"Where?"

"At the bank."

"How did you do it?" Michael demanded eagerly. "Did you just walk in and tell them all about how you wanted the lend of some money?"

Molly's sudden laughter filled the room. "It isn't quite as easy as that. But David gave me a paper to sign and there it was."

"Gosh!" Michael said, and scratched thoughtfully at the lobe of one ear and abruptly darted through the hall. Water ran in the bathroom and presently he reappeared in the kitchen shining and glowing. Jerry came back with the dog.

"Watch this trick, Molly, watch." He tossed his handkerchief away. "Throw yours down, Molly. Did you? Now watch. Find, Lady," he called. The dog circled and sniffed, picked up Molly's handkerchief, dropped it, then picked up Jerry's and thrust it into his hand.

"You old beauty," he crooned, and rough-housed her head.

What could the blind know of beauty, Molly thought, save the beauty of deeds. A little more food than usual went into Lady's plate that night. Michael disappeared with suspicious quietness; but before there was time to think of that Agnes came across from the other house and the typewriter clicked busily in the living-room. And then, very

quietly, the kitchen door opened and a triumphant Michael came in swinging a canvas bag.

"What might that be?" Molly asked.

"That's my carrier. Do you know what I did, Molly? Do you? I bought Tubby's route."

"You bought— For \$15? Where did you get the money?"

"From the bank. I went to see David where he lives and he said to tell him all about it. Then I signed a paper and he gave me \$20."

"Twenty dollars?"

"Sure. David says a business man'd got to have capital. I have to pay for my papers every day and some people pay me by the month." He displayed a \$5 bill. "Wait until you see how much big money I'll make for us, Molly."

"Of course you will," she said, but her eyes were troubled. Today was Tuesday and on Tuesday night David had to be at the bank for the building-and-loan meeting. She went

to the telephone in the hall and called the number of his house.

"David, could you stop in for just a moment?"

He came at half-past seven. Michael, at the kitchen-table, pored over the details of his route; Jerry and Agnes worked in the living-room. Molly stepped out upon the porch and closed the door after her.

"It's about Michael, David. The bank did not really lend him the money?"

"Of course not."

"Why did you give it to him?"

"I didn't," he said quietly. "I lent it to him. He had the chance to buy a business that would pay for itself in seven weeks. He's really ambitious and it was a good opportunity."

"Then," said Molly, "it was not because—because he—"

"It was not," said David, "because he was Molly Lane's brother. It was because he had a chance to pick up a good buy. If it had

been a crack-brained scheme I'd have run him out and sent him home."

The trouble left her eyes. "I couldn't bear the thought of his trading on our friendship," she said steadily.

"Nobody will ever trade on that," he said just as steadily.

She came back through the hall with bright spots in her cheeks. Michael, having transferred himself to the living-room, kept fascinated eyes on Agnes Kenyon's hands as they raced over the keyboard. By and by he came to the kitchen where Molly sat icing the cake.

"You know what, Molly?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "I bet Agnes likes Jerry a whole lot."

"Why"—Molly was caught by surprise—"why, of course she does."

"Aw, I don't mean just sort of liking. I mean the way you like David Ferris. Does she?"

Molly said, "Everybody likes Jerry." The

hand that spread the icing continued to move quietly and deftly. But behind the calm eyes her startled mind faced the incredible. Jerry, blind and forever groping as even the most independent of the blind must grope; Agnes, all freshness and bloom, all life and light. One living in a world gay with color and beauty, the other's world black and dark. Oh, it was impossible!

But, but suppose it wasn't so impossible? She faced it as she had faced every problem of her life, clear-headed, without panic. When a man, even a blind man, had the courage to break down obstacles and fight his way into the sun, nothing was impossible. When a girl was as warm-hearted and as practical as Agnes, anything was possible.

Molly cut the cake and laid a cloth upon the table. After all, it was for the future, and the future had a strange way at times of ignoring human plans and shaping itself. Anyway, it was probably a thing that would never come to pass. And if it did—

DARK CONQUEST

She brought cups to the table. If it did, she told herself, it would be something Jerry and Agnes would have to solve for themselves.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMER CAME AGAIN AND THE LANE GARDEN was transformed into flaming splendor. The blank spaces in the fence had been filled and the gate straightened. Rows of brilliant petunias bordered the walks. On Saturdays Molly made huge bouquets and Michael took them to the State highway that skirted the village and sold them to passing motorists until it was time to start out with his newspapers. The boy's debt to David had been paid, he had four new customers, and now the route brought him a profit of \$2.90 a week. Molly found this money and the quarters that came from the sale of flowers a God-send. But an even greater blessing was the sight of an upright blind man with a

straight spine going where he would beside a majestic dog that seemed to anticipate his every need.

"Watching him walk," Agnes said thoughtfully, "you would never suspect he was blind."

And two years ago he had been a prisoner, chained to darkness, feeling his way through a yawning void with a fearful, hesitant, tapping cane!

There were times, in those days, when Molly found it hard to think of her rejuvenated brother as blind. The untiring Agnes had taught him to use a typewriter; letters still came intermittently and by August he could answer them himself. In September Mrs. Martinson, the instructor for the blind who had taught him to read, came back for a day to see how her pupil fared. There was a gay gathering on the porch and Jerry's clear laughter was good to hear. Before Mrs. Martinson left she had a talk with Agnes and with Molly.

"I wonder," she said, "if you realize how remarkably he has developed."

"You're pleased with him?" Molly asked eagerly.

"Pleased and proud."

"Agnes taught him to use a typewriter and now he writes his letters with no help save that you have to read him what the postman brings. Perhaps it's because he's my brother, but what he writes seems to be strangely put together."

"They are different," Agnes said thoughtfully.

"Could I see one?" the instructor asked.

Jerry had gone out with the dog. Molly found a letter written that afternoon and not yet mailed. Mrs. Martinson read it twice.

"Freshness," she mused, "and intimacy. The sense of one human soul speaking to another." She looked up at them. "This is remarkable. I wonder if he might not be able to turn this into a productive channel."

But none of them, at that time, could see

DARK CONQUEST

a way for Jerry to utilize a gift of putting on paper warmth, and friendliness, and a deep, throbbing current of sympathetic understanding.

"If she could only have thought of something for Jerry," Molly said after the woman was gone. Wise through her years of struggle she knew the need of keeping some new promise before her brother.

But Agnes's reply was surprisingly curt. "I'm glad she didn't."

Molly stared. "You're glad?"

"Yes," Agnes said defiantly, "I am. If anybody finds a way for Jerry I want to find it." Suddenly she began to laugh. "Don't look so shocked. I suppose it does sound rather mad. But don't you understand? Jerry represents the first really useful work I've ever done in my life. I suppose I'll make him my pet activity until I become a perfect nuisance."

It ran through Molly's mind that the world would be a grand place if there were more nuisances like Agnes Kenyon. Life, as it

opened for Jerry, opened for her, too. Now she went out two nights a week with David and on Wednesdays he came to the house for supper. And on a Wednesday that had seen nothing but drenching rain since morning the supper hour arrived and Michael was not there.

Molly, her appetite gone, kept watching the clock and listening to the steady beat of rain against the windows.

"Don't worry," David told her. "He'll be along."

"But he's such a mad lad," Molly said, "that anything might happen to him."

"Why," Jerry asked slowly, "should anything happen to a boy who can see?" There was no complaint in the voice, only a puzzled, uncomprehending wonder. How could danger and disaster overpower people with eyes, surprise people who could see, creep up without warning on people to whom all the world was open light?

There was something so simple about the

DARK CONQUEST

question, something so poignant that it sent stinging mists into Molly's eyes. "It does seem strange, doesn't it?" she asked.

The rain beat against the windows, but now the rain was forgotten. Why of course Michael would be all right. Couldn't he see his way? The blind man had made anything but safety for Michael impossible.

And then Jerry said, "He's coming."

Molly could hear nothing but the rain. "How do you know?"

"Lady tells me."

The ears of the dog were pointed high; the golden tail moved gently. If this were a message how did her brother know it was a message concerning Michael. It did not occur to Molly to doubt. Marveling, she glanced at David Ferris.

"Jerry," David asked curiously, "can you and Lady give each other messages?"

The blind face became intent. "I—I'm not sure. I've wondered about it. She seems to realize what I want, and sometimes—" He

DARK CONQUEST

was silent a moment. "Sometimes I know what she's trying to tell me."

The back door opened and a dripping, sodden Michael oozed into the kitchen.

"Where were you until this late hour?" Molly demanded.

"Aw, gosh, Molly, I guess people want me to leave them dry papers, don't they? I had to ring bells and wait until somebody came, and at two houses nobody came and I had to go back. I don't have to wash, do I? Look how much rain I got. Maybe it would be all right if I just took a towel and had a dry."

"You'll change your clothes," said Molly, "before you're down with pneumonia."

They heard him howling something upstairs that may have been a song. Back in the dining-room he ate with single-minded intentness. Presently, as his stomach filled, his speed of intake slackened.

"You know who I was talking to today, Molly? I was talking to Tubby Sneetz. He wants to buy back the route."

DARK CONQUEST

David leaned forward quickly. "How much did he offer you?"

Michael sniffed. "He didn't offer *me*, I told *him*."

"How much did you tell him you wanted?"

"Forty dollars."

Molly gasped. "But, Michael, when you paid him only \$15—"

"Do you know what he sold me for \$15?" Michael cried indignantly. "Do you? He sold me a route where everybody was going to stop taking papers because he was always late. And now it gives him the gripes because I have made it a good route with no lost customers."

Jerry cried a sudden, fervent "Good boy; good boy, Michael."

"I think we can safely leave this to Michael," David said dryly.

But Molly, startled, could not get out of her mind the fervor of Jerry's approving cry. It was so unlike him. She had the feeling that

it signified something she should comprehend, that it indicated something she should understand. Oh, well, if there was something there for her to find sooner or later her hand would touch it.

David drove her to the movies through the rain. "Michael's right, Molly, in asking more for the route. He bought a business that was literally dying on its feet and brought it back to life."

Molly said breathlessly, "Then you think the mad lad is doing well?"

"There's a brain hidden under that wild, red hair," David told her.

Rain still streamed past all the foggy street lamps when they came out of the theater. At home Lady lay close to her master's feet, Jerry read a new book in braille, and a form scampered up the dark stairway. In the kitchen a boy's wet blouse hung from a drying rack.

"Oh!" said Molly, and walked to the foot of the stairs. "Michael Lane, where are you?"

DARK CONQUEST

Why did you go out in the rain again when you got me out of the house?"

"Aw, gosh, Molly, if I told you first you wouldn't have let me go."

"So you knew that, did you? And yet you went—"

"But I had to go. Gee whiz, when you hear about where you can get a new customer I guess you have to go out and get him. I bet you don't know how hard it is to get new customers."

"Did you get this one?" David called over Molly's shoulder.

"Did I?" The boy chortled. "You know who was there trying to get this customer? Tubby Sneetz. He's starting a new route."

Molly turned quickly to David. "But is that fair after selling to Michael and taking his price?"

"The whole world hasn't the fine standards of the Lanes," David said gently.

Jerry had ceased to read. Molly, coming back to the kitchen after David's departure,

found him with the book still open in his lap and a look of unutterable yearning on his face.

"Michael's doing well, isn't he, Molly?"

Molly's laugh rippled happily. "Would either of us have thought it of him?"

"It must be fine to be able to earn a dollar or two and help along," Jerry said.

All at once Molly knew the reason for that fervent "Good boy, Michael." It was the cry of one who, fallen in the race, cheered on those who still held their feet. It must be fine to earn a dollar! Fine, indeed. And bitter for the fine mind working its way out of crushing blindness and beginning to see no hope of ever achieving independence.

"One big step at a time," Molly said gayly. That gay tone, like her song in times of trouble, was a mask. "Look how far you've gone already. The rest will come later."

"Will it?" Jerry asked. A moment later he said, "I wonder." It were as though he said, "You're forgetting I am blind."

DARK CONQUEST

Molly's head lay that night upon a sleepless pillow. If Mrs. Martinson only had found a way for Jerry to make use of what was, apparently, his one gift! With some promise before him, even a remote promise, he would not have come to this point of visioning the future as barren of all hope, of all ambition. A bird, finding its wings, must needs fly and Jerry, unquestioningly, had found his wings. How, though, was a bird to fly with a useful way hidden from his sight?

In the morning Jerry's face gave no sign of last night's despondency. Molly saw again that Lady had brought him more than freedom of movement. Character had formed in him; disappointment might stab him hard but would never lay him flat. And so Molly sang, partly to lift her own spirits, partly because, when one had the quiet courage that Jerry showed, there was always a possible tomorrow.

In the afternoon Agnes brought over green pears from the Kenyon trees and the

two girls reveled in spices, and fruit, and antiseptic quart jars. Another letter had come at noon and, in the living-room, Jerry's typewriter clicked steadily. At three o'clock Michael clamored in from school and disappeared with his route bag.

An hour later the telephone rang with a sharp, emphatic summons.

"That may be for me," said Agnes.

Molly answered the call. "Yes. Mrs. who? O-o-h! You say he was— I'm very, very sorry. It is a shameful thing and I'll see to it." She came back to the kitchen with her eyes full of distress. "That was Mrs. Sneetz. She says Michael assaulted Tubby without provocation."

"Tubby?" Agnes demanded. "Why, Tubby's a head over him."

Jerry appeared in the doorway, "I'd wait," he said, "until I'd heard from Michael. He'll give you the straight of it. He won't lie."

Yes, Molly thought with surprising relief, the harum-scarum lad would tell her the

truth. By and by clattering heels announced the boy's arrival. He came into the kitchen with a noisy swoop, hung the canvas bag on a nail, and gave Molly and Agnes an ingratiating grin.

"So!" said Molly. "You were fighting, weren't you?"

The grin faded. "I was not."

"Mrs. Sneetz telephoned—"

"But it wasn't a fight. Gosh, I guess I ought to know what a fight is. I just took him by the ears. Do you know what Tubby was doing? Do you? He was going to all the customers I paid him for and trying to steal them away. I couldn't stand for that, could I? How would you like it if you bought a piece of meat and the butcher came and took it while it was cooking in the pot?"

"I wouldn't shake him by the ears," Molly said coldly.

"I bet you would if he was Tubby Sneetz," said Michael, "because he has big ears and that's the best place to grab him."

DARK CONQUEST

Molly found herself staggered by this amazing argument. A strangling sound from Agnes warned her that discipline trembled perilously. She fell back upon an old, well-proved safe-guard.

"Be off and washed," she ordered, "while I give the matter thought."

The boy scurried upstairs. Jerry, who had come back into the doorway, ran a brooding hand over Lady Nan's head.

"I wonder," he said, "if Michael realizes the depth of his good fortune?"

Agnes said, frowning suddenly, "That's a very queer speech, Jerry. What does it all mean?"

"Oh, nothing."

"But it does."

"I suppose," he said slowly, "it means I wish there were something for me to do so that I wouldn't feel so useless." He went through the hall and the dog, as though reading the yearning in his voice, followed him like a shadow.

DARK CONQUEST

Agnes turned to Molly. "When did this start?"

"Last night."

"Exactly what does it mean?"

"Don't you see? He feels he's a load for the rest of us to carry."

All at once Agnes Kenyon's eyes widened and she was eager and animated. "Leave this to me," she said.

"Leave what to you?" Molly asked, perplexed.

"Never mind. I've just thought of something." And before Molly could ask her what that something might be she was gone from the kitchen and across the yard and through the hedge to her own house.

And then, for two days, Molly saw her going and coming from the next door house as though she were driven by some restless demon of energy. On the third day she suddenly came across the yard and up the kitchen stoop. Molly, opening the kitchen door, marveled at the change in her. She had

always been fresh, vigorous, clear-skinned. Today she was radiant.

"It's fixed," she cried. "It was easier than I thought."

Molly's mind groped. "What is it you've fixed?"

"Jerry. Don't you remember my telling you if anybody found a way for Jerry I wanted to find it? Well, I have found it. He's to have a little business of his own."

"A business?" Molly's mind was too bewildered now even to grope. "But a business takes money."

"What of it? Didn't I tell you I had it all fixed? There's a small store vacant on the street running to the railroad station. A fund has been subscribed—"

"For Jerry?" Molly's throat was dry.

"Of course. There are people in this village who have been watching Jerry ever since he got Lady. They admire him for what he's accomplished. These people are subscribing a pool of \$600 to set Jerry up in business. He'll

take the store and the money will pay a few months' rent and put in a stock—tobacco, candy, newspapers, magazines, small odds and ends of notions. He can capitalize on the way the village feels toward him. The \$600 is not a gift. As he earns he can pay it back."

"Oh!" Molly's hand reached out and found the supporting back of a chair. And all at once she remembered that this was the same Agnes Kenyon who had taken it into her hands to allow a photographer to take pictures of Jerry for the newspapers, the same Agnes who had raided the high school for a typewriter. Of course, the newspaper story and the typewriter had turned out well, but—

"But, but suppose Jerry has no liking for it?" Molly asked.

"No liking for it?" Agnes turned upon her quickly. "He must have a liking for it. What else is there for him to do?"

Words froze on Molly's lips. For the first time a dread of Agnes stole through her. It

DARK CONQUEST

was so easy to lose one's self in a crusade, so easy to start out to fix people's lives without the formality of asking how they felt about it.

"Suppose we give Jerry the news," Agnes said.

In the living-room she told the story with an enthusiasm that should have been infectious. But Molly saw the slow gravity, the apprehensive concern, that grew upon her brother's face.

"Has any of this money, this \$600, been collected yet?" he asked.

"Don't worry about that. It isn't a case of yes today and no tomorrow. We can have this money any day we want it."

"That's the trouble," the blind man said quietly. "I don't want it."

"You don't— Jerry! Do you realize what you're saying?"

"I'm sorry."

"Oh! That's better. I thought you couldn't mean—"

DARK CONQUEST

"But I do mean it. I don't want that money. I won't take it."

A pulse throbbed steadily in Molly's throat. Silence gathered in the room. Agnes looked uncertainly, astounded, from brother to sister.

"I—I don't understand. After all the work I've done—"

"You should have asked me before you did anything."

"But you said you wanted to do something useful—"

"Is this supposed to be something useful?" Jerry demanded. A hand went up to the lapel of his coat and gripped it and held hard. "Don't you see what it means, what it would always mean? It would mean cheapening myself and trading on public sympathy. It would mean people saying, 'Let's stop in and buy a magazine and help the poor, blind devil.' I don't want that. I don't want pity. Whatever I do I want to do because there is a call for it. I don't want to be a sort of col-

lective village charity. Don't you see what I mean?"

The silence that had come into the room hung with a sort of dramatic intensity.

"Jerry!" The word came as though Agnes had difficulty in saying it.

"No," he said. Something had happened to his voice. It had not risen, and yet it was all at once strong and full. "I'm blind. I'll always be blind. I'll always be handicapped. But I'm going to be a man."

A thrill of exaltation ran through Molly's blood.

"Jerry," Agnes said again almost in a whisper.

Molly saw her eyes. They were filled with a wonder, a dawning realization, a startled recognition. It was as though she saw Jerry Lane clearly for the first time.

CHAPTER V

THE CHANGE THAT MOLLY HAD NOTICED in Agnes Kenyon's eyes was something more than a momentary shock of discovery. As the days passed the change, slowly and inexplicably, became part of Agnes herself. At first she seemed to have stiffened with hurt as though Jerry's refusal to take the store was an act of ingratitude from a quarter that should have shown only gratitude. Molly, pondering this, felt as much resentment as it was possible for her warm, friendly heart to know. And then she came to see that what she had thought was hurt in Agnes was not hurt at all, but a quieting of some hot, head-strong tide that had abruptly run into a deep current and spent itself.

The tempestuous, dynamic girl next door who had always been so sure, so swift, so quick to mobilize and command, was suddenly less sure of her own judgment, less eager to rush forward to set the human orbits of her own little world to rights. At first, after that surprising day when Jerry rose to take command of his own blind soul, her visits through the space in the hedge had grown less. That was when Molly thought she intended to nourish a hurt pride.

"I'm sorry," Jerry said when her absence had become noticeable. "She's the last person in the world I'd want to make feel badly, but I couldn't do it."

It was after Agnes began to come to the house regularly again that Molly saw the change in her. She was gay, filled with soft laughter and yet, in some way, not the same Agnes. An old relationship was picked up so naturally that it was hard to believe it had ever been laid down. She and Jerry read together, they walked with Lady between

them in a garden touched with the first deep colors of the fall, the typewriter claimed them when an occasional letter still dropped out of the mail. Molly, watching closely, observed that Agnes no longer offered opinions as though they were nuggets from a mine of wisdom to be accepted without question.

"You know, Molly," Jerry said thoughtfully one day after Agnes had gone, "I like her much better this way. Very much better."

"What way?" Molly asked.

"Oh, I suppose it's hard to put into words, but— Well, there was always the feeling that she was being kind and helpful to somebody who was not like other people."

"I never heard you speak this way before," Molly said, surprised.

"I suppose I didn't know."

"What didn't you know?"

"That I wanted her to treat me as she would treat anybody else."

Molly thought she understood. To Lady

Nan he would always be blind, a sightless master to be forever guided and safeguarded. But to all the rest of the world, no. Hereafter, she decided, she would deal with him always as though he were a man whole and entire.

And now another man was emerging in the house. Michael had developed his route to the point where he had to cart his newspapers and magazines around in a small wagon. And one day, it was another Wednesday and David Ferris was at the house for supper, the boy came home with an impressive red ledger stuck under one sturdy arm.

"What might that be for?" Molly asked.

"It's a book," Michael informed her importantly, "like bookkeepers write in. I guess you don't know how much I need a book like this. Do you know why I bought it? Because I have so many customers I can't remember when they pay me. So now I will write it down and nobody will get to thinking I am trying to put a bee on them."

Molly was staggered. "A—a bee?"

"Aw, you know. Like going back for money by mistake after they have paid you the first time."

"But how will you keep your accounts?"

"When they pay me I'll write it down in the book and when they don't pay me I won't write it down."

David gave a shout of laughter.

"Is it a foolish thing for him to do?" Molly asked, concerned.

"Will you listen to that!" the boy cried indignantly. "I'll bet it's like they do at David's bank."

"Not quite," said David.

"Well, almost like it, anyway. Isn't it, David? Isn't it?"

"It's all right, Michael," the man said gravely. "It's a good idea."

"Maybe," Michael said witheringly, "somebody around here will begin to believe I get good ideas." He stalked from the kitchen with the book still under his arm.

As he went through the hall Molly noticed how much he had grown and his need of new clothing. A suit, and a warm coat, and shoes, and perhaps boots that laced to the knees so that he would be able to go through the deep snows. Lost in this contemplation her eyes took on a far-way look. She did not notice Jerry and Lady come into the kitchen. It was David's voice that aroused her.

"What is it, Molly?"

"Clothing for Michael," she said simply. Somehow, it seemed natural that there should be no secrets from David.

"How much will it cost?" Jerry asked. Lady Nan cocked her ears. Those long, sensitive ears always went up alertly when Jerry spoke.

She dealt with him now as she had promised herself to deal with him, as though he were a man whole and entire. The day when she would hide unpleasant facts from him would never come again. Hereafter life would be for him, if it lay in her power,

DARK CONQUEST

what it was for every normal man, heart-ache and joy, success and disappointment, the good with the bad.

"I don't know where I'm to get him a suit for less than \$15," she said. "The coat may cost more, and we must figure on shoes and boots. Forty dollars at the least. I don't know where I'm to lay my hands on \$40 now for there'll be taxes to be paid on the house next month."

None of them had heard Michael come into the room.

"You know what, Molly?" he shrilled. "I bet if we had this old suit cleaned and pressed it would look swell. I bet it would."

David Ferris said something under his breath. Molly's lips trembled.

"Perhaps I made a mistake," Jerry said in a hard, grim voice. "Perhaps I should have taken the store."

"Aw," Michael cried in scorn, "when did us Lanes have to go out snatching nickels because people were sorry?"

DARK CONQUEST

An inner glow lighted the blind man's face and routed the grimness. "David," he exulted, "we are a family, aren't we?"

"I've always known it," said David. He knew, too, from whence came the inspiration for this family so closely knit. And the inspiration was spreading. It had harnessed and tamed a young wildcat. It had lifted a blind brother and filled his dead soul with a living breath.

This was moving-picture night, Wednesday, but as David drove Molly to the village theater his mind was far from pictures. A thoughtful silence held him as they drove back after the show.

"There's some sudden worry, David?" Molly asked.

"Not exactly a worry. I've been thinking about Jerry. It's not ripe for talk. Perhaps, by tomorrow—"

On the morrow, after the bank had closed in the afternoon, his car drew up at the curb outside the Lane home. Jerry's ears, sharp as

the ears of the blind are sharp, recognized the sound of the motor.

"Here's David," he called in through the house.

Molly came to the porch quickly. Watching David swing up the walk she wondered if he brought news of what had been on his mind last night. If it had to do with Jerry then it could be only for Jerry's good.

"Jerry," David said as he mounted the porch steps, "how would you like a job?"

"A job," Jerry asked him quietly, "or a donation wrapped up to look like a job?"

"A real job; a typewriting job." David sat upon the porch railing and swung one leg. "The bank is organizing a tax club, something like a Christmas club. In September you begin to pay a fixed sum every week or every month; by the following September the money's there to pay a year's taxes. It's not a new idea, but our bank has never before gone in for it. We're sending out such a flood of mail that our typists can't handle it

all along with their other work. We need help. Five cents a letter. It costs us that much to do them with our own girls. The letters are all alike; merely a different name at the top. If you could turn out five hundred of them, Jerry, it would help us a lot."

Five hundred meant \$25. Jerry threw his head back; one hand touched Lady Nan's twitching ears.

"She's brought us nothing but luck," he said.

Molly, strangely, said nothing. Later, when David left, she walked with him to the car. There he spoke swiftly.

"You're afraid this isn't what it seems to be?"

"Is it?" she asked frankly. "I wouldn't want your heart to think it was doing a kindness when there might be only a bitter awakening for him at the end."

"It's not my heart that's doing this," he told her. "It's the bank. Banks don't throw their money away. Of course, when there's

work to be given out friendship plays a part, but not unless the friend can do the job. I recommended Jerry. I told them he was capable."

It wasn't the same world; not with Michael working, and Jerry working, and the pulse of the house beating high, and glorious Indian summer stealing down to rout a too-early touch of fall. In the morning a messenger from the bank brought letter heads, envelops and a list of those to whom letters were to be sent.

"Did Agnes come over?" Jerry called from the living-room.

"I'm here," Agnes answered.

"Will you read me the letter a few times while I type? I'll soon know it by heart."

Nothing, Molly thought, marked the change in Agnes so much as this, that where once she would have walked in and assumed swift command she now waited to be asked. The morning fled, and presently Michael was home from school for luncheon.

"Are you helping Jerry today, Molly? Are you?"

"Agnes is helping him," Molly said.

The boy walked into the living-room and surveyed the scene of labor. "Gosh," he said, "I'll bet Agnes helps you a lot, doesn't she, Jerry?"

Agnes laughed. "Jerry needs so little help it really can't be called help." Today she stayed for lunch. Before a whistling Michael had gone back to school the typewriter was running again.

Days passed, and a blind man worked beside a woman he would never see and was strangely glad when she came in each morning. The tips of his fingers grew tender from the constant tapping of keys.

"Suppose I type awhile," Agnes suggested. "It will give your fingers a chance to lose their soreness."

He shook his head. "You don't know what these sore fingers mean to me."

"I think I do know," she said. This was his

first step on the road and he must see it through alone.

On a Saturday morning the last letter was typed. Michael had gone off to the hills with his wagon to search out the first clusters of ripe wild grapes. A bank messenger was to call for the letters; as Agnes packed them into boxes the typewriter clicked in short bursts of speed.

"Did we overlook one?" Agnes asked.

Jerry pulled a sheet from the typewriter. "I got to thinking how I would have written that letter if I were the bank. Everybody writes differently, I suppose. I wondered—" He was like an abashed boy surprised in an act of precocious endeavor.

All at once Molly found herself thinking of the teacher for the blind who had told them Jerry had a gift. "Could I see it?" she asked.

Agnes stepped to her side and they read the letter together. Spots of color appeared in Agnes's cheeks.

DARK CONQUEST

"Oh, Jerry," she said casually, "would you mind if I showed this to David? I'll stop at the bank, anyway, for your check."

Jerry said uncertainly, "He might think it mighty fresh of me."

"Oh, I don't think so." She was gone before there could be another protest. A voice lingered in Molly's ears, a voice that, for all its casualness, was vibrant with suppressed excitement.

Noon marked the closing of the bank, and Agnes had not returned. A ravenous Michael came down from the hills with a goodly load of grapes and an apprehensive Jerry listened on the porch for a familiar step. Late in the afternoon the step came.

"Did they find fault?" Jerry asked anxiously.

"With a check for \$24.20," Agnes told him.

"Give it to Molly." He threw back his head with that characteristic motion. "Now Michael can have his clothing."

DARK CONQUEST

It was, Molly thought warmly, what she might have expected. A tremor ran through Agnes Kenyon's lips.

"It must be wonderful to have brothers and sisters," she said wistfully. Abruptly her mood changed. "I have something to tell you. I showed Jerry's letter to David. I had an idea but I had to be sure before I began to move. I've grown cautious about ideas."

Jerry said, "I hurt you the day I wouldn't take the store, didn't I?"

"Not as much," Agnes said unexpectedly, "as you'd have hurt yourself had you taken it. I suppose you don't know it, Jerry, but there's something peculiar about your letters. David saw it at once. They have a friendliness; you read them and they draw you out. Do you know how much long overdue money stands on the books of the Main Street storekeepers? David says about \$45,000. Old depression debts, mostly. The people couldn't pay, and then they began to stay away from the stores where they owed the money, and

now they're ashamed to go back. What sort of letter would you write, Jerry, to a man who owed you money for a long time?"

The sightless face grew intent. "Our own people around here?"

"Here in the village and through the county."

"They've had some hard years. They're honest. I'd be gentle with them. Even if I could not collect my money now I'd not lose their good will."

Agnes clapped her hands. "Isn't that what I told David? He and I have spent the afternoon talking to tradesmen along Main Street. They've wanted somebody who could go out and try to collect this money without using an ax and without leaving scars. They'll turn over all their old accounts, Jerry, and pay you 10% of every dollar you can collect for them. It means 10% of some part of \$45,000."

"But—" Molly looked at her helplessly. How could they expect her blind brother,

even with wise Lady Nan at his side, to get around the whole county?

"Not that way," Agnes said. "Don't you see? It will be done with letters, the kind of letters Jerry writes."

Jerry's head was thrown back as though he saw an incredible vision that could not be real. "You'll help me, Agnes?"

"Of course."

"And if it becomes profitable we'll share equally?"

"No," said Agnes.

A chill of dismay ran through Molly. Dear Lord, make her see that Jerry wouldn't take so much for a mere "Thank you!" Make her see it.

"You'll be the brains of this," Agnes said. "I'll be the office help. Perhaps one-quarter would be all I'd be worth; perhaps less. Let's wait and see how it turns out."

Jerry's head was still thrown back. "We can't do business as Jerry Lane and Agnes Kenyon."

DARK CONQUEST

"Why not?" Agnes demanded.

"We'll need a business name that carries the sound of what we're trying to do." A dog's paws padded the porch. "Lady, give us a name."

The dog gave a low, deep bark.

"She's trying to show her good will," said Molly.

Jerry's fingers snapped. "That's it; the Good Will House. We'll need books to keep our records, stamps and stationery—" His voice trailed off.

"You have a check," said Molly. "Do you think Michael would take it for clothing when you need it for this?"

And so the Good Will House was born and the Lane living-room became an office. Agnes bought a day-book and a ledger and carried copy for letter-heads and envelops to the printer. Lists of names and amounts owed came from the merchants.

"We need more than a man's name and what he owes," Jerry said. "Why hasn't he

been able to pay, sickness, no work, what? If he hasn't paid there must be a reason. We want to know that reason."

The days crowded one upon the other, and Jerry found the hours too short. Blindness fell from him. Eager discussion was carried from the living-room office to the luncheon-table and back to the office again. A chicken farmer named Haskell, whose wife was hopelessly ill, owed the Sunrise Garage \$43 for gas and repairs to his truck.

"We won't write Haskell," Jerry said, "not yet, anyway. He has enough of worry on his mind now."

Agnes looked at him steadily. "You won't tell that to the garage?"

"Why not?"

"They may not like it?"

"What's that got to do with it? If they want us to collect their bills they must let us collect our way. If we can't collect without badgering poor unfortunates then we'll never collect."

Agnes said, in a voice far from steady, "The Good Will House! What a happy name."

Stationery came from the printer's and Michael was sent to the post-office for sheets of stamps. Up to this point they had been digging deep into the stories that lay behind the debts; now they began to write letters and suddenly a blind man was the voice, the light and the life. Instinctively Jerry led, ordered, directed; and a girl who had always taken direction into her own hands found herself leaning on him for counsel.

Molly, keeping out of their way lest she prove a hindrance and a distraction, marveled at the richness that had come into her brother's voice. She drank in the sound of his quick footsteps, footsteps that had long been halting, as he dictated, changed, corrected. Sometimes her work about the house took her into the living-room. They did not know she was there. On the third day she held Agnes for a moment at the luncheon-table.

DARK CONQUEST

"How does the work go?"

Agnes's eyes were blue pools. "I've never seen such letters."

Molly took to watching for the postman. The fourth day brought nothing. But on the fifth day there were two letters for the Good Will House. One letter, registered, held \$13 in cash, the other contained a money-order for \$18.

"Jerry!" Agnes cried. "It's the start."

"What do the letters say?" Jerry asked. "Are they friendly?"

So good will came first! Agnes read the two letters and walked to the window.

"It's great," Jerry breathed.

She turned from the window passionately. "It's more than that! Nobody but a Jerry Lane could have done it."

"And an Agnes Kenyon," Jerry said slowly.

The midday mail brought \$42 more. And late in the afternoon a man came to the door.

"Could I see Mr. Lane?"

Agnes brought him to the living-room. He stared at a blind figure seated behind a desk beside a magnificently tawny dog.

"I knew that letter had come from somebody who had known a hard day," the man said. "My name's Carl Grinnell. I owe Thompson's \$72 for groceries. When your letter came it gave me the feeling I'd like to pay something off and start back. What might you call a start?"

"Ten dollars might be a start for one man and ten cents might be a start for another," Jerry said.

"I knew you were real," Carl Grinnell cried. "Make it \$12."

Agnes wrote him a receipt and took him to the door. Then she hurried back to the living-room office.

"Ninety dollars today," she called.

Jerry's sightless eyes seemed to see something beyond the room.

"It's more than \$90," he said. "Let me

DARK CONQUEST

hold it a moment. Not because it's \$90 but because of what it means."

She handed him the money and the post-office orders. Their hands met.

Without warning a glowing warmth ran through him. Suddenly, strangely, he began to tremble and his fingers closed around a hand that had come to him out of the eternal darkness. He felt her fingers stiffen. They did not draw away. But slowly, after a moment, he released her hand and let it go.

Some place in the house Molly sang.

"We'll have to—" He fought for steadiness—"we'll have to start an account at the bank and pay the stores by check. Will you see David about it?"

"I'll see him in the morning." Her voice was far away, remote, as though it came from a great distance.

"I think that will be all for today."

She was gone—swiftly.

Molly bustled into the room. "It's past

DARK CONQUEST

five o'clock and time you rested. I've made a pot of te— Where's Agnes?"

Jerry said, "She went home."

"Home? Without a word? Isn't that strange?"

"We had finished."

"But—" She stood in the doorway for a moment and then walked to his chair. "What's wrong, Jerry?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing."

"I know better. What is it?"

Lady stretched and looked at them questioningly.

"I discovered something today," Jerry said out of the silence. "Perhaps I should have suspected it. Anyway, you must not worry. Everything's going to be all right. There's really nothing to worry about."

The breath caught in her throat with a hard, cruel stab. "It—it's Agnes, Jerry?"

"Yes. And I'm blind." He stood up and when he spoke again his voice was almost as though he spoke to himself. "When I

DARK CONQUEST

first went blind I thought I would never know joy again. I have been happy. I'll be happy again. Blindness—" one hand moved "—blindness has compensations. It teaches you how to live without the things you want."

Tall and straight he went toward the door. And all Molly could think of was how brave, fine and strong he looked in this moment of sightless defeat.

CHAPTER VI

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY MONTHS, almost for the first time since Lady Nan had come to them, a shadow lay over the heart of Molly Lane. Michael, piping a shrill, ear-splitting whistle, worked in the cellar at fashioning a model *aéroplane*. Her blind brother sat with a book in his lap, but his fingers did not move across the pages of raised type. She knew that the book was only a pretense. Momentarily she had the dismayed feeling that nothing could ever be the same again.

Tonight the walls of the house shut them in and shut the world out. But tomorrow Agnes would come across the yard to help in the activities of the Good Will House. Two persons who had been happy in their

work would all at once meet with a wall of embarrassment between them. A man yearning with blind intensity for that which he could never have; a radiant girl asked for a love she knew she could never give. A dread of the morrow crept over Molly Lane.

And then suddenly she had a grip on herself and the dread was gone. She gave her head a decided, vigorous shake. These dark fears were nonsense. Jerry had climbed too far out of the pits of darkness to be defeated now. He could be counted on to go ahead, unbroken and undismayed.

The whistling stopped and Michael's voice shrilled up the cellar stairs. "Hey, Molly. You know the jelly from the grapes I brought? Will you make some grape tarts? Will you, Molly?"

Molly went to the pantry for flour and lard. Half an hour later she took the pastry shells from the oven and, when they were cool, filled them with jelly and called her brothers.

Michael smacked noisily appreciative lips. "How many did you make, Molly? Can I have all I want?"

"Will you first eat the two you have?" Molly demanded.

The boy demolished the second tart. "You'd better save some for Agnes. She certainly likes your jelly tarts. What are you looking at me that way for, Molly?"

Leave it to the young scamp, Molly thought, to say the one thing that should be left unsaid. She sent a quick glance at Jerry. Not a muscle of the blind face had changed.

"Agnes thinks you make the best grape jelly she ever tasted," Jerry said quietly.

Molly's heart swelled. Oh, but she had known how this brother of hers would stand up to misfortune! It took strength to pick up the broken pieces of a dream and go on as though nothing had happened—and he had the strength.

"Of course I'll put aside some for Agnes," she said.

DARK CONQUEST

The alarm clock, ringing at six-thirty, awakened her to a day of rain and murk. Her room was almost dark. A sound came from downstairs and she stepped out into the hall. Lady Nan, usually on guard across the threshold of Jerry's room, was not there. Again the sounds came from downstairs, unmistakably the echo of footsteps.

"Jerry, is that you?" She came down the stairs quickly. A tall figure paced back and forth across the living-room office. "What are you doing up so early?"

"I awoke and got to thinking."

"Probably too many tarts last night," she said casually. Was he to fight his battle heroically by day only to have ghosts creep in and mock him through the lonely stretches of the night?

Jerry's voice broke in on her eagerly. "Molly, I have an idea. It's too soon to talk about it; anyway, it may come to nothing. We'll have to risk some money and it may fail. Give me another day or two—" He re-

sumed his pacing of the room and Lady's eyes followed him with a steady, unblinking devotion.

Then it was not the fangs of regret that had routed him from his warm bed but some new, galvanizing plan of endeavor.

Michael came down to breakfast clamoring for more tarts. At eight o'clock the postman blew his whistle on the front porch. There were nine letters for the Good Will House. She brought them to Jerry in the living-room and went to the pantry. A blue rain-cape fluttered across the grass and a girl ran up the back steps and came in through the kitchen door. She closed the door and stood with her back against it.

"Get me a pan, Molly, a big, roomy pan, and I'll stand in it and drip." She tried to say the words with a nonchalant drawl, but her voice was strangely throaty and breathless. "Any mail?"

DARK CONQUEST

Jerry called from the living-room. "Nine letters."

"With you in a moment," Agnes called back at once.

Molly sang. Yesterday a thread had snapped; today it was retied. She had counted on Jerry to go on; now she knew she could also count on Agnes. Probably neither of them would ever forget the emotional crisis of yesterday. Agnes Kenyon's attempt at a drawl had been a pitifully thin mask; the real Agnes had stood with her back pressed rigidly against the door. But apparently a blind man's revelation of his heart and a girl's panic-stricken retreat from what she had seen were to be ignored. There was work to be done and they were to go on with it.

The mail had brought in \$122. Sixty-seven dollars arrived with the second delivery. Voices blended freely and naturally in the living-room and the typewriter clicked industriously. There was money to

be taken to the bank, receipts to be mailed, payments to be sent to merchant-clients and a tide of fresh letters to go out. Twice Agnes slipped into the blue cape and went off through the rain. The late afternoon mail came in with \$141. Agnes filled out another batch of receipts and entered the transactions in her account-books. The rain had stopped and through the breaking clouds in the west came the triumphant blaze of the descending sun.

"Shall we call it a day?" Agnes asked. There had been constraint only when she handed him typed letters for his signature. It was as though they feared that their hands might meet again.

"Tired?" Jerry asked. There were lines in his face.

It came to her that she would never feel the full weight of the fatigue that must be his. She, at least, could take the day's problems and marshal them where she could see them; he would always have to find them,

DARK CONQUEST

visualize them and hold them fast in the dark. "Not too tired to go on if it's necessary."

He hesitated. "I'm tired, too," he admitted.

Molly had tea for them and tarts left over from last night. That peculiar raptness came swiftly to Jerry's face and the weary lines were miraculously gone.

"What do you think of Molly's grape, Agnes?"

"None better," Agnes said.

"That sounds too—too pat. What I want is cold, critical opinion. Harsh opinion, if you can give me that. Taste it slowly; roll it around on your tongue. Search it for something wrong."

A long minute passed.

"It still remains the best grape in the world," Molly said with conviction.

Some inner flame touched the blind eyes and Jerry stood up. "Lady hasn't had her run today." He called the dog and buckled

DARK CONQUEST

on the harness. Together they went along the street into the golden glow of the sun and the man's head was bent a little as though in thought.

"What is it?" Agnes asked.

Molly didn't know. She saw with revealing clarity that there was a change in him overnight and that the change went deep. "He's like a man driven, driven—I do not know how to put it."

Agnes said breathlessly, "Sometimes I think he sees things that—that we can't see."

In two hours Jerry was back, changed again, talkative and buoyant. He had met David Ferris and they had discussed the Good Will House. Plainly the meeting with David, sturdy, dependable David, had been a needed tonic. But with supper over the restless nervousness came down upon him once more. Lady, uneasy, paced through the rooms. And Molly found herself wondering anew at the uncanny understanding, the

unexplainable bond that melted the great dog into her blind master's moods.

The telephone rang.

"I met Jerry today," David's voice said. "He's doing splendidly, isn't he?"

Molly glowed. "Isn't he?"

"Are you all right?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know. Probably I'm imagining things and borrowing trouble. But Jerry seemed— Are you sure you're all right?"

Her heart cried a tender, "David!" Aloud she said, "Who would I call to first if anything were wrong?" She left the telephone and found Michael absorbed in a book and Lady Nan searching frantically through the lower rooms. The dog ran upstairs, came down, and whined anxiously at the back door.

"Where's Jerry?" Molly asked.

"Jerry?" Michael lifted vague eyes. "Good gosh, he's around, isn't he? Lady is."

She threw open the kitchen door and

DARK CONQUEST

Lady Nan rushed past her. She heard the dog breaking through the hedge, crashing among the flower-beds. Then the crackling stopped and a voice throbbed out of the dark night.

"You are glad to see me, old girl, aren't you?"

That voice might just as well have said, "You are glad to see me because it makes no difference to you that I am blind." Footsteps came along the graveled path and Molly put out a hand and steadied herself against the door.

"Are you there, Molly?"

"Yes, Jerry."

"Will you ask Agnes to come over?" His face, in the light that streamed through the open kitchen door, was calmly quiet. Molly knew that out there in the darkness of the yard still another change had taken place. Lady Nan knew it, too. The dog stood beside him with all the nervous harassment gone from her.

DARK CONQUEST

Agnes came at once. Jerry sat at the living-room desk and the dog's head was on his knee. Michael, round-eyed with wonder, squatted on the floor with a chubby finger thrust into the closed book to mark his page.

"How much do you have to pay for a good jelly at the stores?" Jerry asked.

"For how large a glass?" Agnes wanted to know.

"The size Molly puts up."

"Fifteen cents." Agnes looked at him curiously. "You're not thinking of going in the jelly business?"

"We're in it," Jerry said quietly.

We! That included Agnes, of course. Molly waited.

Jerry spoke again. "How much does it cost you to put up a glass of jelly, Molly?"

Molly wasn't sure. Two cents, perhaps, with Michael bringing the grapes down from the hills at no cost. The plan seemed mad. Business demanded money and a force

of workers. And yet she was gripped with a tingling, quickening sense of adventure and bold daring. A new world beckoned and a blind man bade them follow him into its mysteries.

"Glasses," Jerry said, "shouldn't cost more than two cents—probably less. We'll need labels, shipping cartons, address stickers. They have trade directories at the bank; we can get the names of manufacturers and wholesalers from David. Glasses, cartons, labels, fruit, sugar, heat, shipping, promotion shouldn't cost more than nine cents a glass. We'll sell six for a dollar. That gives us almost an eight-cent profit. We'll have to start slowly, putting in the profits from the Good Will House as we go."

Molly's mind worked with clear logic. The money that Jerry was now earning promised security, a chance to save against the uncertain future. Apparently that future was to be sunk in a wildcat scheme. And yet that tingle of adventurous daring

grew stronger. If this was Jerry's dream she would go with him.

"Michael," Jerry asked, "how many boys can you gather who own express-wagons?"

Michael screwed up his nose. "What do you want them for?"

"To bring us wild grapes from the hills. We'll pay \$1 for each wagonful."

Michael was on his feet. "A dollar? Good gosh, Jerry, you mean a whole dollar? I'll bet I could get fifteen fellows to go for a dollar. I bet I could."

"Get them. You'll lead them up Saturday morning. I think we ought to call you the fruit manager of the Molly Lane Jellies Company. There's a name. Molly Lane Jellies. It has a home-spun sound."

"You mean I'll be the boss?" Michael demanded.

"You'll be the man in charge of the grape-pickers."

The boy swelled. "You just let me catch any one chiseling on how much he puts in

his wagon for a load. You just let me catch them. I'll show them how to be a boss."

Molly's lips twitched. The wild, loyal lad! She looked toward Agnes.

"You don't think much of the idea, do you, Agnes?" Jerry asked unexpectedly.

Molly marveled. How had he known?

"If the stores can sell jelly over the counter for fifteen cents," Agnes asked slowly, "what chance have you to sell Molly's for more than sixteen cents wholesale? The stores would have to set a retail price of at least twenty cents."

"We're not selling to stores."

"But—"

"We're selling by mail."

A silence lingered in the room and grew profound. And the blind man's hand stroked the dog's head.

"You don't like that idea either, do you?" His voice was steady with an unruffled calm.

"How many persons pay attention to

sales letters?" Agnes asked. Her hands made a protesting gesture. "Don't you see, Jerry? I'm trying to answer you honestly."

Molly wanted to cry out, "But he has the gift for writing letters." Lady's ears were rigid.

Jerry nodded slowly. "I've thought of that. Perhaps you're right; perhaps I'm wrong. Nevertheless, we're going to try it."

There was the "We" again. Whatever plans Jerry made, whatever far roads he followed, in the secret corners of his mind Agnes would always be a part of the plan and the journey.

The thought stayed with Molly that night and kept her long awake. The alarm clock announced another day. Downstairs a typewriter clicked. She found Jerry already working at the desk in the early hour.

"I'll have something for you and Agnes to read a little later," he said.

Agnes arrived at eight o'clock before Michael had gone to school. Fourteen letters

DARK CONQUEST

had come for the Good Will House. Jerry pushed them aside as though, for the moment, they did not matter.

"Read this," he said, and handed them a paper. He got up from the chair and began to pace the room.

Molly and Agnes Kenyon read the letter together:

May I ask you to close your eyes?

I want you to taste my sister Molly's wild grape jelly as a wise, knowing child welcomes a new and captivating flavor. With its eyes closed blissfully the child allows the flavor and the savor to seep deep into its palate. I want you to close your eyes, to surrender yourself to rapture, to enjoy the full goodness of the miracle that Molly Lane has put into a glass.

There is no secret about this jelly. Molly has not spoiled or diluted the natural tang these wild grapes took from the hills. She has preserved inviolate the richness a ripening sun gave them as they grew on silent, sunny slopes. All she did was to add sugar in delicate, sympathetic, understanding measure.

I know you will welcome Molly's jelly to your home because there is no better jelly made. If,

DARK CONQUEST

after sampling one glass, you do not agree with me, return the carton at my expense and—

Agnes Kenyon's hand, holding the letter, fell to her side and Molly read no more.

"Jerry," Agnes said, "is one-quarter of the Good Will House earnings too much to pay me?"

He turned quickly. "It isn't enough, but I know it's all you'll accept. Take your quarter from our funds. We do not want to find ourselves spending your money by mistake."

"You're going to spend my money, Jerry. Every dime of it."

"No; you don't believe in it."

"That was last night," Agnes told him. "I've changed my mind."

The blind face filled with that odd look of raptness.

The mail brought the Good Will House the incredulous amount of \$308. Molly carried lunch in to them and they ate at the desk. Where, she wondered, were they to

DARK CONQUEST

find the time for a second business by mail when all the day was already taken up? But that, too, was merely a challenge, a part of the adventure.

"We have the nights," Jerry said.

"I'm ready," Agnes announced.

They must have glasses at once, for the grapes that would come down from the hills could not be left lying around. Agnes prepared to take the morning's receipts to the bank.

"Ask David where we can get glasses," Jerry called to her.

"And cartons," Molly cried. They would not need cartons at once, but it would be well to know.

Agnes was back in an hour. While Jerry telephoned to the city for glasses and samples of cartons she slipped out to the kitchen and spoke in an undertone to Molly.

"I don't think David likes this."

Molly was disturbed. When a little after three o'clock a car stopped outside the house

she went down the long walk to the gate. If they were to talk of her brother it would be better to do it where he could not hear.

"Jerry's not thinking of selling your jelly by mail?" David demanded.

"It's gone past the thinking, David."

"But can't you see how hard, how almost impossible it will be? Selling by mail requires a special knowledge, a shrewd judgment of human nature, steady, persistent effort— You don't believe in this?"

"I was uncertain at first."

He stared at her.

"There is something about him," she said, "that makes you believe."

"Must he risk the first dollars he's ever earned?" David cried bitterly. "Aren't you entitled to something of comfort? You must protest against this."

She shook her head.

"Don't you ever think of yourself?" He went on with a rush, "Don't you ever think of me, of us?"

DARK CONQUEST

Her troubled eyes met his for just a moment. And in a moment all the dark despair and anger went out of him.

"Forgive me," he said. "I shouldn't have said that. I understand."

All at once she was warmed and healed again.

Lights began to burn far into the night in the Lane house. A blind man, taking command, divided and parceled hours remorselessly. Minutes were too precious to be wasted. At eight o'clock in the morning the Good Will House took up its work of sympathetic counseling; at four o'clock that work was locked up and put away. Supper was at six. At half-past seven Agnes came across from the other house and Molly Lane Jellies came to life. Carton samples came by express from the city and the two girls judged and valued. Jerry ran his hands over the boxes and tried to visualize what they were like. Agnes brought a copy of *Who's Who* from the village library and the slow

labor of compiling the start of a mailing list began.

Saturday Michael led forth fourteen grape-pickers. Before noon the cavalcade was back and Molly stared in appalled consternation at grapes; grapes in the kitchen, grapes on the back porch, grapes piled in the yard against the house.

"Get a girl to help," Jerry ordered.

Agnes saw to it. A neighborhood girl came in and by mid-afternoon the house was sweet with the mouth-watering aromas of bubbling fruits and sugar. David Ferris, arriving at eight o'clock to take Molly to the movies, took one look about the busy, steaming kitchen and took off his coat.

"Give me an apron, Molly. I'll strip grapes."

Molly didn't know where the days went. Twice more Michael went out with the pickers and twice more she and her helper were swamped. Slowly she came through the third flood of fruit with the knowledge

that the pressure was over. A hard, killing frost had come in the night; what fruit was left on the vines in the hills had been withered. There were no more wild grapes to pick.

And now she noticed what she had been too busy to notice before. Jerry was thinner and paler.

"You must rest," she said in concern. "You are working entirely too hard."

"There'll be time for rest later," he answered.

The days ran on and still a blind man drove on tirelessly. Money flowed into the Good Will House in a small stream and letters from Molly Lane Jellies went forth steadily. Down in the cellar that Michael had cleared of every scrap of dust and had whitewashed, hundreds upon hundreds of glasses of jelly were packed in tiered cartons. And still the days passed and slowly a shadow came across Agnes Kenyon's face. Molly feared that something would creep

into the other girl's voice and betray her discouragement.

"I'm not thinking of myself," Agnes said. "I'm not thinking of you. Don't you see, it's Jerry. His whole heart is in it."

An order for a dozen glasses came in the third week. Five days later a request for six glasses limped out of the mail. It was two weeks before another order arrived.

"How bad is it?" David asked.

"Agnes is fearful," Molly said.

"And you?" He looked at her curiously, questioningly.

Her voice was steady. "Not while Jerry's faith holds. So long as he goes on I will go with him. If he stops—"

But a blind man, quiet and unshakable, clung to the task. Night after night names were selected; night after night letters were prepared. The faith of Agnes shriveled and tottered. A blind man's force held her up.

"He makes me ashamed to doubt," she told Molly with a catch in her voice.

DARK CONQUEST

And then, suddenly, the tide turned. Three orders came in a single mail, five arrived the next day, four the day after. Almost before they knew it the tide had become a small flood. Repeat orders began to reach them and that was the most encouraging sign of all.

"We may not have enough jelly to last," Molly cried happily.

The flood swelled. A letter came from a woman who had already ordered twice. "Have you," she wrote, "any other jelly as delicious as your wild grape?"

"There's no reason we shouldn't have," Molly thrilled.

Jerry sat with the letter in his hands a long time.

"I must have," he said at last, "a complete statement of how much we've spent, how much jelly we have on hand, how much we've sold and how much profit we've made. We must put up other fruits. We'll need a stove specially built for jelly-making,

larger preserving kettles—and a small car. Agnes knows how to drive.”

Molly spoke. “Why the car, Jerry?”

“It will be cheaper for us to buy our fruits right at the farms.”

Agnes looked startled.

“Have you figured the cost?” Molly asked.

“Roughly.” Again she had the feeling that his blind eyes had seen ahead much farther than theirs. “That’s why I want the statement. I’m going to the bank for a loan.”

That, Molly thought, should be easily arranged. With David to go to—

“This is out of David’s reach,” Jerry said. “David’s a teller. A bank teller has no authority to make loans.”

But— She caught herself as she was about to say that David had arranged a bank loan when she bought Lady Nan. The truth burst upon her. So it had been David’s money and not the bank’s, just as it had been David’s money that had financed

Michael's newspaper route. He had tried not to have her know, not to deceive her but to save her from a possible hurt to her pride. Color crept softly into her cheeks.

In the morning she went with Jerry and Lady to the bank. The sunlight showed how much thinner he was than she had realized. At last she was genuinely alarmed.

David saw them come through the door and hurried out of the teller's cage.

"Jerry has come for a loan," Molly said. She lowered her voice meaningly. "From the bank, David."

All he needed was a look at her eyes. "You're not angry? I—I wanted to help you, Molly."

"Could I be angry with a deed kindly meant?" she asked him.

He brightened. "I'll take you to Mr. Henderson."

And so there entered the president's office a blind man, a girl and a dog. Molly, long the backbone and courage of the Lane

home when it was sinking, began to tremble. A bank was a mysterious place that dealt in fabulous sums of money locked away in strong vaults; it awed her. Why should a bank president sitting in an office of marble and mahogany bother with their little jelly business?

"I'm delighted to see you," Mr. Henderson cried heartily. "A remarkable dog, Jerry. I've often admired her on the street. What can I do for you?"

"We have come for a loan," said Jerry.

"Ah!" Some of the heartiness was gone. "We're drawing the lines a little tight on loans. How much did you want?"

"Six hundred dollars."

"For what?"

"We have a jelly business that has begun to grow. We need money for equipment and expansion. At present we put up only one jelly. That limits us too sharply. We want money for fruit in the spring."

"You have a sales organization?"

DARK CONQUEST

"We are our own sales organization," Jerry said quietly. "We sell by mail."

"I know something of your ability as a letter-writer," Mr. Henderson said thoughtfully and stared hard at the ceiling. "If you could have a statement prepared—"

"I have brought one with me."

Molly had ceased to tremble. The blind brother whose courage had not faltered through the early, discouraging days of Molly Lane Jellies sat there serene and calm. Once he had taken his strength from her; today she took her strength from him.

Mr. Henderson put the paper down. "Jerry, I'll admit this is impressive." He swung sideways in his chair. "I wonder, Miss Lane, if you realize how remarkably well he's done?"

"Oh, but I do," Molly cried.

"Who will endorse the note, Jerry?"

"I will," said Jerry. "So will the Good Will House."

Mr. Henderson pressed a button and

DARK CONQUEST

picked up a telephone. "David," he said, "prepare a note for \$600 and credit Mr. Lane's account with that amount."

Out in the street Molly throbbed to the memory of David's face smiling at them through the grille of the teller's window as they left the bank. Her brother urged Lady forward at a speed that almost forced her to run.

"Jerry!" she protested. "You'll have me out of breath."

"Agnes will be watching for us," he told her.

It grew on her that for weeks, for many long weeks, their lives had been geared to feverish speed. Hurry, hurry, always hurry. Her brother had gone on like some ceaseless machine that could not stop. Even now they must hurry again, back to a waiting Agnes.

"Jerry," she said, "it will be weeks before we can buy our first fruit. Why don't you rest that little while. You need rest."

DARK CONQUEST

The blind face seemed to grow tense. "I must—work," he said.

A throb of understanding went through her. Why hadn't she suspected before that the work he did was more than work, more than ambition and endeavor in its full swing? It was a clutch for something to do, something to plan, something to keep the mind continually gripped—something to keep him from thinking of the unattainable hunger he carried in his courageous, blind heart.

CHAPTER VII

MOLLY THOUGHT THAT NO SPRING HAD ever been fairer than the spring of that year. The buds that burst triumphant from every dormant branch were no richer in their promise of a luscious summer than the prospect of prosperity that had come to the Lane home. Every glass of wild grape was gone from the cellar and the files in the living-room held orders for more than a thousand glasses of jams and jellies to be delivered as made.

A new stove with special burners stood in the kitchen and great, shining preserving kettles hung from pegs in the pantry. Part of the front fence had been taken down, a cinder runway had been laid past the side

of the house, and at the end of the runway stood a one-ton truck bought second-hand with David's advice. On its side was painted in white letters: MOLLY LANE JELLIES.

The truck had been delivered that morning. Jerry, Agnes and Molly were grouped about it when Michael, clad in a new gray knicker suit, came from school for lunch.

"Hey, Jerry, is it all ours? To keep?" The boy swarmed up behind the wheel. "How fast can she go, Agnes? Hey, Jerry! Will you go for berries on Saturdays so I can go along? Will you?"

Jerry laughed. "This isn't a one-day-a-week business, Michael."

"You can go on some Saturdays, can't you?"

"We will be going to the farms very many Saturdays," Agnes told him. Her hand went to the button on the wheels. "The horn could be better, Jerry."

"You take me on Saturdays," Michael burst out eagerly, "and you won't need a

horn. I can sit up on the front seat and yell. Do you want to hear me yell?" He drew in a great lungful of air and sent forth a wild, blood-curdling shriek.

Lady Nan quivered and growled. Molly stuck fingers into her outraged ears.

"Michael! Do you want the neighbors to think there's a murder? Go in to your meal."

"I had to show them how I could give a good yell, didn't I?" the boy demanded, aggrieved, and went up the back stoop.

Jerry said, "You'd better get to your lunch, too, Agnes. No hurry. We're pretty well caught up on the Good Will House."

"I don't want to miss any of this," Agnes said. "It's too exciting. I'll be back before one."

He listened to her footsteps until they were gone, his head a little bent as though anxious to catch the last faint rustle of her footsteps through the grass. Molly saw that another change had taken place in him. For

days she had noticed a deepening tranquillity, a slow lessening of the restless force that drove him. At the kitchen door he suddenly swung about.

"You try to carry all our troubles, don't you?"

"Troubles?" Her eyes were wide. Of course she was always concerned for him and Michael both, but what fresh trouble could there be now?

"There's something I've wanted to tell you. You've been worrying about me, haven't you?"

"Not this last week or two since you've stopped driving yourself so hard."

"I'm not speaking of work," he said after a silence. "That day we left the bank—You knew what I meant, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"That's over. It was a little hard for awhile, but it's over."

She knew that it would never be over, not in the sense of forgetfulness.

DARK CONQUEST

The afternoon saw them planning the spring business.

"We're promising always to deliver fresh jellies and jams," Molly said. "What are we going to do with what's left from a season when we begin to pack the same fruit anew?"

"We never made a promise that good jelly would be thrown out because it had aged," Agnes protested.

"It's an implied promise," Jerry said slowly, and ran one hand across his chin. "Who's got the answer?"

"Can't we sell to the county hospitals?" Molly asked.

Jerry's hand came down from his chin. "She has it, Agnes. The hospitals will be glad to buy for cost. The quick money for the unsold pack will help to buy the new crop. In the long run we'll cash in heavily by having our mail customers know that what they buy from us is always fresh."

Agnes said, "We have only wild grape

labels. Isn't it time we sent copy to the printer for the other fruits?"

"It was a mistake to print the wild grape," Jerry said. "These are home-made jellies; the glass should have a home-made look. We'll buy sticker labels and type the kind of jelly." He snapped his fingers. "And we'll type on each label the season it was packed."

The three of them had the thought that they were covering ground, getting some place, planning constructively. A growing business! To what extent would it grow? Agnes took fire.

"Have you thought about the business becoming too large for Molly's kitchen?"

The blind eyes puckered in thought. "We have the barn. A carpenter and a painter could turn it to our needs."

"I wonder," Agnes said in the pause, "if anything escapes you."

David, meeting the farmers at the bank, became Jerry's observation post. A week

later he brought word that strawberries were almost ready in the south valley. Saturday, with Agnes at the wheel and Lady and Jerry beside her on the seat, the truck rolled out of the driveway. A haughtily superior Michael sat on a folded blanket on the jouncing floor.

Eight miles out they came to Richard Harll's farm. A weather-faded sign said: "STRAWBERRIES." They stopped in the road and honked the horn. A man in overalls lumbered out to them.

Jerry spoke from the seat. "My name is Jerry Lane. What are the prospects for strawberries?"

"Lane? Say, you're that blind fellow who's gone in the jelly business?"

Michael sprang to his feet indignantly. Couldn't the "blind" be left out of it? His smoldering eyes found Agnes Kenyon's.

"I'm the man," Jerry said, unperturbed. "We can use only prime fruit. What can you do for us?"

"Mr. Lane, you've come to just exactly the right place. Prime fruit is all we handle. It's a little early yet. Along about next Wednesday we'll make a good picking. We took some today—not more than two dozen boxes."

"Could I see the fruit?"

The man stared as though that word "see" startled him. "Eh? Why, sure. I'll get some for you." He came back from the house. "Here they are; as good berries as you'll be able to buy in the valley. Six cents a box."

Jerry took the box. The top fruit was ripe and mellow. He poked a finger into the container. The man passed up another box. Tilting it against his chest he explored the bottom. There the berries were hard and only partly ripe.

"It's a little early yet," Mr. Harll said hastily. "You take next Wednesday, now—Yes, sir; about next Wednesday—"

Jerry handed back the boxes.

DARK CONQUEST

"I'll tell you, Mr. Lane, maybe I could do a little better than six cents—"

"I wouldn't buy from you," Jerry said distinctly, "at four cents. I don't want to do business with a man I can't trust."

The car rolled on.

"Didn't Jerry tell him?" Michael exulted. "Didn't he, though?"

Agnes stole a look at the blind face beside her.

The next stop was at the farm of Carl Grinnell, who had come to the Lane home in the early days of the Good Will House and had begun to pay off a debt. The farmer came out to the car at once.

"Hello, Mr. Lane. What brings you here?"

"Strawberries."

"For the jelly business? I don't know. I can give you only a limited quantity. If you're figuring on volume. . . ."

"I thought you went in heavily for berries," Jerry said.

DARK CONQUEST

"I do. But when we pick for the retail market we pick under-ripe. You'll want fancy fruit ripened to a point. I doubt if I could give you more than five hundred boxes. Will you come for them or will I have to make delivery?"

"We'll come for them."

"That will be better. You can look the fruit over. If it isn't as represented, leave it here. Five hundred boxes? I'm afraid I can't let them go for less than six cents."

Jerry waved a hand. "Sold. I'll send you a contract."

"With you," Mr. Grinnell said, "a contract isn't necessary."

They drove away. Michael squirmed on the blanket.

"Hey, Jerry! Do you know what? You forgot to ask him for a sample."

"With some men, Michael, you don't have to see a sample."

Agnes looked at Jerry again. With some men you didn't need a contract!

DARK CONQUEST

Before the afternoon was over they had contracted for another thousand boxes and had arranged for the spacing of the deliveries. They rode up through the evening valley and were near home when Jerry spoke.

"Could you find another couple of helpers for Molly, Agnes? She's going to need them."

Molly met them at the door. "I have the grandest news. There were twenty-eight orders in the noon mail. One was from a woman who had eaten our jelly at another woman's house."

Jerry's head went back. "I was counting on something like that."

Carl Grinnell telephoned late one afternoon, and next morning Agnes, Jerry and the dog were on the road at daybreak. Three helpers crowded Molly's kitchen. At noon, when Michael came home from school, the Lanes went to a small restaurant three blocks from the house. It was Michael's first

dinner out. He stared in fascination at the waitresses, touched the wall mirrors gingerly and ran an experimental finger over the gleaming tile. The menu caught his attention.

"Can I order anything I want, Molly? Can I?"

"Anything, Michael."

"All right, then. I'll have five pieces of pie."

But Jerry and Molly put a stop to that.

"Aw, gosh," Michael grumbled in disgust, "we might just as well stay back home in our own house." He ate in a scowling silence.

The day had brought in orders for one hundred and fifty glasses of jelly. That night Jerry paced the floor.

"How much," he asked abruptly, "would it cost to make over the barn? It's only a matter of paint, a few partitions, a few windows. Could it be done for \$300?"

Molly was conscious of Agnes leaning

forward eagerly. "You're not thinking of doing it now?"

"At once. Why wait? We're going to need it."

"We already owe the bank," Molly cautioned.

"There's no need to worry about that. We've paid off \$250 of that loan. We're growing and the kitchen is too small. Our jelly profits, the earnings of the Good Will House— We don't have to worry about the expense of utilizing the barn. We'll have to do it in the end, anyway. Why wait until it becomes desperately necessary?"

Michael was touched with inspiration. "Look, Jerry. Suppose I help the painter. Gosh, I bet I could do some swell painting. Wouldn't he charge us less if I helped him good?"

Jerry chuckled. "I'm very much afraid, Michael, he'd be apt to charge quite a bit more."

Agnes rumped the disappointed boy's

hair. "With two more girls in the kitchen you can't hold an eight-cent profit for each glass, can you?"

Jerry considered. "For the present, it may hold us down to seven and a half. Later, as business increases and we buy more heavily, we'll probably get better prices at the farms. We'll make our eight cents."

Molly found her pulse beating faster. Another step forward. Another bit of daring, another stroke of high adventure, with blindness walking in the van. She caught Agnes's eye.

"I'm for it," Agnes said.

David Ferris came to the house that night and they told him of the plan. Molly, remembering his earlier opposition, was apprehensive. But David gave the project an enthusiastic approval.

"I was wrong about this jelly business," he confided to Molly. "He has a head. And even if this seemed like biting off a bit too much I'd be for it."

DARK CONQUEST

"But why?" She was puzzled.

"Because it means more comfort in the part of the work that you do. Tell Jerry I'll send men around to give him estimates."

A week later a carpenter sawed and hammered in the barn. On his heels came a painter. Within ten days Molly Lane Jellies had taken up their new quarters.

"We'll need heat," Jerry said. "Not much, but enough, however, to save the stored stock from freezing when the cold weather comes."

"Does anything escape you?" Agnes asked. Was there a catch in her voice or did Molly only imagine it?

"When you're blind," Jerry said, "you have nothing to do but think and plan." He took a paper from his pocket. "I've written a new paragraph for our sales letter. What do you think of this?"

The paragraph was short:

You cannot buy a Molly Lane jelly or jam that has lived out its season. This is strawberry time;

DARK CONQUEST

we are now doing up strawberries. Next spring, when strawberries are ripe again, every glass of this season's pack will be sold to our local hospitals at cost. Not because it has ceased to be a wholesome jelly or jam, not because it has deteriorated, but because we give you our pledge that when you buy a Molly Lane product you buy the last word in purity and freshness.

Molly knew, then, that his gift was even greater than she had thought.

Agnes said, "Jerry, I envy you."

Orders climbed to more than two hundred glasses a day. Strawberries passed their local prime; they could still be bought from jobbers in the city but Jerry refused to take chances. Gooseberries, currents, blackberries ripened in their turn and the barn steamed fragrantly. Spring retreated before the advance of summer; a black sign with gold lettering appeared inside the front gate announcing the home of Molly Lane Jellies.

June turned hot and sultry. The preserving kettles added to the heat and Molly grew pale.

DARK CONQUEST

"Are you sure this isn't too much for you?" Agnes asked anxiously.

"Too much? And today bringing orders for more than three hundred glasses?" Laughter, low and rich, rippled from Molly's throat. "I love it." She found it hard, sometimes, to believe that the miracle of prosperity was true.

Another week passed. Momentarily they were out of fruit. David telephoned from the bank and reported that a farmer from the hill country had told him of an orchard promising a choice crop of crab-apples.

"That's a trip for tomorrow," Jerry decided.

The morning found the truck on its way and a brooding, disconsolate Michael scowling in the driveway with school-books under his arm. Jerry rubbed one of Lady's ears and breathed deeply. A strange, unexplainable happiness lay over him. He knew when they climbed the grades by the tilt of the car; he knew when they ran through dense

groves of trees by the walled-in reverberation of the motor. And the air coming through the truck, carrying the scent of summer, spoke to him as it would speak to no person with sight.

"How much change would we have to make," Agnes asked, "if our sales reached one thousand glasses a day?"

"That wouldn't happen for several years."

"I know. I suppose I'm merely dreaming, but what changes would we have to make?"

"We'd need a steam sterilizer, larger stoves and larger kettles. We'd have to give Molly a regular staff and put somebody in charge of shipping."

"Couldn't Molly and I handle shipping with Michael's help?"

"It would have become a man's job. Anyway, it's time Molly began to train a girl to take her place. We can't tie her down to jellies forever. She'll want time for shopping, pleasure trips, David— Oh, lots of things."

Agnes said slowly, "Do you ever plan relief for yourself?"

He smiled. "I have the easy end."

Easy? Her hands tightened on the wheel. Was it easy to plan, direct, execute from behind a never-ending veil of darkness?

"You—you seem to give all your thought to us."

Suddenly his whole soul wanted to cry out, "I always think of you." In a moment the repression and self-control of months was swept away. Her nearness filled his heart with gladness and his body with a warmth that warmed him through. And all at once he knew it was her nearness to him that had made the day different from all the other days when she had been alone with him on the road.

He fell into silence. Frogs croaked from a marsh and the air was damp in the hollows. They topped a rise and came to the farm of Blake, the man whose crab-apples promised a choice crop. Feeling his way,

DARK CONQUEST

Jerry climbed down from the car and Lady leaped to the road and stood at his side.

Mr. Blake told them he would have a heavy crop.

"Some of it, of course, not high grade. Different trees, different sections of the orchard. We'll pick carefully, Mr. Lane, and see that you get only the best."

David had vouched for the man as reliable.

"Let me know when you're ready," Jerry said. With Agnes's guiding hand on his arm he climbed back into the truck, and now Lady Nan was between him and the girl.

"Lady won't bother you there, will she, Agnes?"

"Why—" She looked at him sharply. "Why, no."

His blind-sharpened ears caught a note in her voice that told him he had hurt her. She did not know that she had expressed the hurt. His arm burned where her fingers had touched it. Again he rode in silence. The

DARK CONQUEST

sky had clouded, the sun was gone, and the wind blew cool upon his face. And yet his face was hot.

The car stopped with a sudden jerk.

"What a beautiful cluster of mountain laurel," Agnes cried. "It's in by a pond. I must get an armful for Molly. She'll love it."

"Is it hard to reach?" Jerry lowered himself from the truck.

"Don't come. It's rough going. I'll be only a few minutes."

He stood in the road with Lady and her voice came back to him. "I've never seen such beautiful laurel. There's one magnificent bush, and if I can reach it—" Her voice broke sharply and ended in a cry of "Jerry!" And then there was silence.

Jerry cried an alarmed, "Agnes!"

No answer.

"Agnes. Are you hurt?"

His voice lingered, but no voice answered him. Lady whined and moved anxiously. A

DARK CONQUEST

cold sweat broke out on Jerry's forehead and his hands were ice.

"Agnes!"

And still no answer.

"Lady!" His voice was an agonized prayer. "Take me to her. Find her, Lady."

The dog understood. The whining stopped and she started off at once. But abruptly the pace slackened and she warned him with her body. He felt around with the wisp of a cane he always carried in his right hand. He felt lumps and mounds, hard, uneven, adamant. His heart almost failed. Rocks!

"On, Lady."

The dog led him slowly, keeping so close to him that he could go forward only by inches. They turned and twisted; his feet floundered on slipping gravel. He knew that she was leading him between rocks, skirting him around barriers, working him steadily, persistently in one general direction. Once, when she had to take him up

DARK CONQUEST

the steep face of a rock, she whined her anxiety. Twice his groping, struggling feet slid back. His soul cried out in agony. Sight. Sight. Oh, for just five minutes of precious sight!

Grimly he tried the rock again. And now Lady shifted and got behind him. Her strong body was a brace. Foot by foot he fought forward, foot by foot he won to the top. Lady promptly shifted so that she was partly in front of him. He discovered the direction in which she wished to take him and lowered himself until he sat upon the rock. Edging forward, he slid slowly down the other side.

The dog stopped.

"On, Lady."

Lady did not move.

"On," Jerry pleaded.

The dog's whine was almost a human cry.

In the darkness that walled him in Jerry felt about with the cane. If Lady refused to take him farther there must be a reason.

DARK CONQUEST

He felt to the front, to the right— The cane touched something soft.

“Agnes!”

And still no answer.

Kneeling, balancing by feel and instinct, he got her into his arms and got her off the ground. He listened. Her heart still beat. She was alive.

“Agnes. Please speak.” In a passion of fear and tenderness he bent his head and pressed his lips to her face.

Eyelids fluttered against his cheeks.

Startled, his arms froze. And thus he knelt, holding her.

“Put me down,” she said in a whisper.
“I’m all right now.”

“Are you sure? What happened to you?”

“I slipped and turned my ankle. I think I must have fainted. I’m all right now.”

His arms did not relax, nor did she make an effort to leave them. He felt that it would be joy to hold her thus forever.

“I love you,” he said. “I never meant to

DARK CONQUEST

tell you. I would not have kissed you had I thought you would ever know. I love you."

It seemed an eternity before she answered. "Why shouldn't you tell me?"

The world stood still. A cat-bird shrilled from a near-by thicket and a gray squirrel played along the branch of a tree. Jerry's arms tightened with a hungry ache.

"If you know what you're saying—"

Her voice breathed in his ear. "I know what I'm saying. I know what I mean. I've known since that day in the living-room when you caught my hand."

"You ran away from me."

"I was startled; it came so suddenly. Later I knew. Then I could find no way to let you know."

There was no longer a world. There was just this spot among the rocks; just the two of them.

"I can bring you only blindness," he said huskily.

"Blindness?" There was wonder, and

DARK CONQUEST

magic, and glory in her voice; a catch, the edge of a sob, a peal of triumph. "What is blindness when there is so much of courage, and kindness, and sympathy, and— Oh, my dear, my dear. You do not know how much you are really bringing me."

CHAPTER VIII

JERRY LANE CAME BACK TO THE ROAD AS a man comes forward who had suddenly and miraculously found life. With Agnes on one side and Lady Nan on the other he emerged from the rocks stalwart and straight. The uncanny dog, as though sensing the happiness of her master, made of her golden tail a frantically joyous plume. Agnes helped Jerry up into the truck and mounted nimbly on the other side—and now the dog was no longer between them. A minute passed and the car did not move.

"You *are* hurt," Jerry cried.

Her hand touched his arm. "I'm photographing a picture I'll always carry in my mind—a pond, and scattered rocks and blooming laurel."

DARK CONQUEST

"I wish," Jerry said wistfully, "I could see it for just a moment." Then the wistfulness was gone. "I don't have to see it. I've lived it."

The air blowing down from the hills was still cool; his face no longer hot. He began to sing a song that Molly often sang about the house. Agnes Kenyon's voice joined his.

"Drive slowly," he said when the song was finished. "Let's hold this moment as long as we can."

"All our lives," said Agnes.

The speed of the truck slackened. Mile after mile they came slowly down the hill slopes. Suddenly she began to laugh.

"We forgot Molly's laurel." She, too, would henceforth think in terms of "We."

"We're bringing her something better," Jerry said.

Late in the afternoon the truck turned into the driveway and stopped near the barn. Molly ran from the house.

"I was almost sick with worry," she

DARK CONQUEST

called to them. "When you did not get back I thought something must surely have happened."

"Something did happen," Jerry cried and let himself down from the truck. "Something wonderful, Molly. Tell her, Agnes."

Agnes Kenyon's eyes, eloquent, were no more eloquent than the rapt, blind face.

"I think Molly knows," Agnes said breathlessly. Jerry's hand went out to her and she took it and held it.

Molly's arms went around them both.

"You're crying," Jerry said blankly.

"Don't you know it's because I'm bursting with gladness?" She turned abruptly and ran back to the house. There, after awhile, Agnes found her.

"Is it all right, Molly?" The girl's voice was low.

"Don't you know it is?"

"I—I wasn't sure. You're not afraid, not really? No little hidden fears?"

"Why should there be? You're both so

DARK CONQUEST

sincere, so fine and real. I did have a fear once, but it's gone. It's been gone a long time."

"His blindness?"

"Yes."

"Jerry will never be blind to me," Agnes said simply.

Molly's song that late afternoon was the song of a lark soaring in the heavens. She loved every foot of this house in which she had been born, but today it held a beauty she had never quite realized. The voices of Agnes and Jerry, coming from the living-room, throbbed with a warmth and a richness that went through her. There were jelly orders to be filled and she went to the barn and packed glasses into cartons and filled out address stickers. Michael could carry the cartons to the truck— She saw the boy's red head come along the driveway and beckoned to him with a cautioning finger.

"Michael, you'll never guess the news."

"Are we getting another truck? Could I

DARK CONQUEST

learn to drive one of them? Could I? I bet in no time I would be such a swell driver—”

“Hush! What would we be doing with two trucks, I’d like to know. Jerry’s going to be married.”

“Yeah?” The boy’s eyes grew round with wonder. “Who’s he going to marry?”

“Agnes.”

“Aw, gosh.” Michael’s face fell into a dark scowl. “Does he have to go and get married? Does he? Why does he have to spoil it when everything is going so swell?”

“You impossible lad! Would you mind telling me how in the world that’s going to spoil anything?”

“Well—” He scuffed a shoe across the barn floor. “That will make Agnes one of our family, won’t it?”

“Of course.”

“Sure. Didn’t I know it? And do you know what that is going to mean? Do you? All right, I’ll tell you what it’s going to mean. It means I’ll have just one more boss

to tell me what to do." He stalked toward the house.

Molly's laughter followed him. She labeled the last carton and came to the kitchen to prepare supper. Jerry had gone out with Lady Nan, and Agnes sat at her desk entering items in the ledger. She flashed Molly a smile.

"The Good Will House took in \$380 to-day."

That meant a \$38 commission. Thirty-eight dollars in one day and the jelly orders added to that— It still seemed a miracle.

"Will you stay for supper, Agnes?"

"I'd like to. Today above all other days. I'll tell my folks."

"They don't know about Jerry?"

"Not yet."

Molly's hand ran down the hem of her apron. "How will they look upon it?"

"My mother has known for a long time how I felt toward Jerry." Agnes put the book away and came toward the door.

DARK CONQUEST

"Jerry," she said dreamily, "and Michael and you. I'm getting all the best of it, Molly."

Molly's song soared again.

Supper was a meal long to remember. Gay hearts, light hearts, young hearts! Amid the talk and the laughter Michael sat with a puzzled look on his face. His eyes roved darkly from a golden-haired girl to the blind face of his brother.

Agnes lifted an eyebrow meaningly. "Does Michael know?"

Molly's lips had a quirk. "I told him."

"Sure, she told me," the boy blurted. "I guess I'm one of this family. I get told things."

"What do you think of it?" Jerry asked.

Michael debated the question glumly. "Maybe it will be all right," he conceded grudgingly.

Jerry threw back his head with a shout of laughter.

Molly brought in the dessert, a three-

layer cake covered with mocha icing. Michael immediately forgot the dire threat of Jerry's marriage.

"Do you know, Molly," Agnes contemplated, "this is about the only thing I think I can cook better than you?"

Michael roused. "Layer cake?" he demanded eagerly.

"A girl should be able to do one thing better than anybody else," Agnes complained. "Why the surprise?"

Michael was on the edge of his chair. "Can you, Agnes? Can you make swell layer-cake? Will you let me come to supper sometime when you and Jerry have layer-cake? Will you?"

Agnes drawled, "What do you think of that, Molly? First he sneers at me, and then he expects me to throw open the doors and killed the fatted calf."

"I didn't say anything about a calf," Michael protested. "I was talking about cake."

DARK CONQUEST

This time Jerry's laughter shook the room.

They sat at table a long time. Michael disappeared into some remote corner of the house. Jerry's fork moved thoughtfully back and forth across the table-cloth.

"The Good Will House will probably not last more than another two years," he said. "Some of the people simply can't pay now and we're not here to harry them. Some have been so hard hit that they'll never be able to pay. Those that can pay will ultimately clear their debts. But by that time the jelly business will be firmly on its feet."

"Have you ever thought of canned vegetables?" Agnes asked.

"Why should we?" Molly asked. "Isn't it best to have one product and a good name for it?"

Jerry nodded. "I spoke to David a month ago. He says it's folly to try to spread out too far and too thin."

Somehow, Molly thought, David played

DARK CONQUEST

his part in all their lives. Away from the table at last she and Agnes washed and wiped the dishes, and Agnes whispered the story of what had happened at the pond. Jerry's contented whistle sounded from the porch.

"Isn't this David's night?" Agnes asked suddenly.

"He'll be here by eight o'clock."

"Do you know it's twenty of? Run along and get ready."

"But there's still the pots and pans—"

Agnes tried to imitate Michael's blurted accents. "I guess I'm one of this family; I guess I can finish them." She pushed Molly toward the door. "Don't keep him waiting tonight, Molly."

A single glance of understanding passed between them.

In her room her heart beat faster and she took unusual care with the rites that Michael derisively called "prettying up." She heard David's car stop outside the house and

heard the echo of his deep voice as he talked to Jerry. She came downstairs and stepped out upon the porch.

David's voice stopped in the middle of a word. "Molly!" he said.

That one word was a tribute. Molly's laugh, soft and tremulous, was all silver and gold. She sank back into the soft luxury of the car.

David slid in behind the wheel. "Want to see the show here in the village or run over to the Westwood theater?"

"Would—would you mind if we did not see a picture tonight?"

"You're all the picture I need to see, tonight or any night. Where to?"

"Just drive. I have something to tell you."

They glided from the curb. "Any place in particular?"

"Do you know a pond on the road to Hillcrest with a large scattering of rocks in front of it?"

DARK CONQUEST

"That would probably be Silver Pond."

"Take me there."

"There isn't a house within a mile of that pond."

"I know. Take me there."

Mystified, he followed the road to the hills. A thought struck him sharply.

"Good or bad, Molly?"

"What, David?"

"This news?"

"Would I hold bad news suspended over you like a sword?"

"If it were only—" But he did not say what it was he hoped. He seemed to speak more to himself than to her as though something lay in his mind that he dared not put into words.

The moon came up over the dark rim of the hills, a young moon that all at once filled the valley with a veil of misty splendor. Molly watched the strong, quiet hands that held the wheel. They were, to her, symbolic of security, of a dependability that would

DARK CONQUEST

never waver. The world might shake and totter, but she knew that David would always stand between her and harm.

"We ought to be near the pond," he said.

She was the first to catch sight of shimmering silver through the thinning trees. The moon bathed the pond with an indescribable beauty. A ghostly mist rose from the water like gossamer lace.

"Stop here, David."

Still mystified, he brought the car to a halt. She stared at the ominous shadows that were the rocks. Her imagination pictured her blind brother stumbling forward, holding to a hand-grip, and Lady Nan guiding him unwaveringly among pitfalls and traps. Blind, and yet he had managed to reach Agnes's side.

"Can you tell me now?" David asked.

Still watching the rocks she said, "Jerry and Agnes are to be married."

A whip-poor-will called through the night; the distance-softened hoot of an owl

came faintly on the summer air. Some small animal scurried through the brush at the side of the car.

"Molly!"

She turned toward him.

"You're sure of this? Positive?"

"They told me."

He spoke slowly. He had to speak slowly for his voice wasn't steady.

"When—when Jerry went blind that seemed to be the end of everything. All our little plans, our dreams; there didn't seem to be anything left. You felt it was your duty to take care of him and that it wouldn't be fair to throw the burden on me. It has been hard, harder on you than on me, and yet I never heard you complain. Sometimes I rebelled; sometimes I spoke hasty, bitter words that hurt you. But I've always honored you—always. Now, with Jerry and Agnes married— Molly, look at me."

Her eyes met his, brave, level eyes suddenly grown tender.

DARK CONQUEST

"This releases you, doesn't it?"

"How can you release a heart," she whispered, "that has been captive for so long a time?"

He kissed her. Their love had been too deep, too strong for voluble demonstration. It was too strong and deep now. But she trembled in his arms.

"Are you cold? This mountain chill—"

"I've never before been so warm with gladness."

Now it was his arms that trembled.

"My David," she said.

The moon was higher in the sky and the mountain was all dark shadows save for the places where the moon shot it with a silver radiance. The call of the whip-poor-will had become a benediction. The future, once lost, was theirs again.

Oh, but there were eager plans to make. So many plans. Molly told David she had begun to train a girl to supervise the work of jelly-making.

DARK CONQUEST

"When we are in our home"—it might have been a rapt Jerry who spoke, the way her head was thrown back—"I must have the time to keep it clean and becoming, the way the house of a bride should be, for your home-coming. You won't want a tired wife to welcome you at the door. I'll supervise a little, of course, and they can always call me if they need me. But my first thought and my strength must always be for you."

His lips touched her hair. "What about the old house?"

"It should be theirs, don't you think?"

"Yes. It might be hard for Jerry to grow accustomed to a new place."

"And then there's the business," Molly said. "It will be better for them, living so near the barn. They'll be only a step away."

"We must begin to look for a house of our own," David told her. "It must have a garden and a roomy garage—"

"And a wide fireplace in the living-room—" Molly interrupted eagerly.

DARK CONQUEST

"And the sun pouring in through the windows of the breakfast-nook—"

"And a porch with red roses climbing a trellis—"

"And a dry cellar with a good furnace—"

Molly's laugh was like the tinkle of bells. Ah, trust David to be practical. From romance to coal and ashes. She snuggled against his shoulder.

"And then there's Michael," she said.

He did not answer at once.

Her breath almost left her. The old house would not be the place for Michael, for Jerry and Agnes would be too busy with jelly and the Good Will House to give him the attention a mad lad would need. And if he shouldn't stay there, and if David did not want the care of him—

"What a lot of fun it's going to be," David said, "watching him grow up right under our eyes."

Molly's breath came back with a rush.

The moon grew brighter and the hills

DARK CONQUEST

were hushed. Reluctantly at last David turned the car back toward the village in the valley. A dog ran out of a farm-yard and barked as they passed, running along for a while beside the car.

"If it hadn't been for Lady Nan," David said suddenly, "none of this could have happened."

Molly nodded soberly. First Lady, and after her—fortune. For Lady had brought Jerry a courage and a new faith, and out of these had come everything else.

A night-light burned in the lower hall; every window in the house was dark. David helped her from the car.

"No more seeing you only twice a week, Molly."

Her eyes smiled at him.

"Every night."

Her lips were warm. "I'll count the hours until the evening, for the evening will always mean your coming."

She closed the front door and locked it.

DARK CONQUEST

The feet of a dog, eternally watchful, padded overhead.

"It's all right, Lady."

The hall was sweet with the scent of the garden. Molly went to the kitchen and busied herself with familiar tasks. She set out eggs, and sliced bread to lay out for the morning's toast. She laid a fresh cloth upon the table and washed a bowl of berries.

Presently she stood in the center of the kitchen and looked about her slowly as one who says "Good-by." Every nook and cranny of this old house held some sacred memory; the years had consecrated every room. Even though she would leave it gladly with David, the thought of leaving brought a pang.

Michael's room would be empty, except, of course, when the harum-scarum lad came to stay the night expecting layer-cake for supper. Her lips took on a momentary quirk of humor. A woman's voice would be

lifted in song, but the song would not be hers. Agnes's smile would brighten the days; Agnes's hand would turn on the welcoming lights as the evening shadows fell. Agnes and Jerry! Who better than Agnes to go beside her blind brother through the far reach of all the good days to come?

She set the berries in the ice-box to chill. Her task was done.

"May Agnes always," she said aloud, "love him as I love David."

As she went upstairs another thought of Michael crossed her mind. What would the mad lad think of it all? That he was acquiring still another boss? One could never be sure about Michael.

The boy lay in sleep, one sturdy arm thrown above his head. A damp curl of red hair clung to his forehead, a smudge was streaked across the freckled nose. Evidently, with no one to see to it, he had joyously neglected to wash. The lad needed a bit between his teeth and a firm, guiding hand on

the rein. And he would need, before long, the counsel of a man, generous, understanding and wise.

She stood there looking down at him. He'd find the counselor and friend in David. A thrill of tenderness ran through her and she kissed the boy's warm cheeks.

"God keep you, Michael," she breathed.

Lady lay across the threshold of Jerry's room, the eternal sentinel and guide. Molly went down upon her knees and put her arms around the tawny head.

"What would we ever have done without you?"

The dog's moist tongue touched her cheek. The tawny head nestled against her shoulder.

"Thank you for everything, Lady. Everything."

Jerry stirred in his sleep. Instantly the dog pulled away from her and went silently to the bed. Reassured, the shepherd came back to the threshold.

DARK CONQUEST

Molly's arms went around the glorious head again.

"Lady!" she said softly. "Oh, Lady! May Agnes always love him as you do."

It seemed, at the moment, a greater tribute than her own love for David. She went down the hall to her own room with a song in her heart.

(1)

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



128 013

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY